

THE EMERALD REALM BOOK ONE

A RETELLING OF SNOW WHITE

POISONED HEART

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The Emerald Realm: Poisoned Heart

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prologue

The dark-clad man knelt in the center of the expansive throne room. It was just before dawn and the soft glow of moonlight filtered through the stained-glass windows. The king was seated on an elaborate black throne, garnished with opulently large rubies and veined in gold trim. His face was lit upward by the lone lantern at his feet, casting his features in eerie shadows. Holding his back straight and eyes level, he sat with the dignity only a proud ruler could possess. He gazed down intensely at the man dressed in black.

“I presume your visit means you have reached a decision?” the king asked, his voice powerful and looming in the quiet space.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the man replied smoothly. “I accept the assignment.”

The king’s mouth curled upward slightly. “Excellent, I shall have the guard equip you with any supplies you require and some proper armor. Create a list of anything you may need and submit it to my advisor.” Picking up the lamp, the king rose from his seat. The light danced around the room as it shook and glistened off the jeweled throne.

“As you wish, my king, but I have one question before I begin my task.” The man remained kneeling, but raised his head slightly.

The king narrowed his eyes. “Well, out with it then,” he snapped.

“Why may I not simply eliminate the target immediately?” the man questioned. “Is it not more of a risk sticking close to them for such a period? I must confess, in all modesty, that the extended hunt sounds thrilling, but if the target escapes, I fear your eminence would be placed in a state of peril. I understand the full extent of the assignment; however it may be in your best interest to simply proceed with the attack.” He looked up at the king, who had crossed the room toward where he knelt.

The king loomed over the man, the lamp creaking as it swung from his hand. “There is no need for you to concern yourself with such trivial details,” the king explained sternly, gazing down at the man. “If you truly are worried about my security, then relieve yourself of the notion. Know that my assets are well-protected. However, I believe that your true concern lies with whether any unfortunate circumstances affecting my well-being would result in you not receiving the promised reward.”

The dark man smiled slyly and gave a subtle shrug toward the king.

“Your reward will be provided after the assigned task is proven complete. You have my word.” The king held out his hand to the man, who in turn, rose to his feet and shook it firmly, sealing the agreement.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” The man grinned a toothy smile. “It shall be done.”

chapter one

I stood in front of my elongated mirror, taking in a long look at my glowing reflection. The early morning sun reflected off the glass, making my outline appear ablaze along the edges of my slim figure. Being the princess and only heir of a powerful kingdom meant that appearances held a heavy importance, and I stepped closer to observe the efforts of my beauty sleep. My dark brown eyes looked extra big this morning, and my hair shone with a silky sheen as with the loose strands framed my face. The new dressing maid stood quietly behind me, watching as I undid the braided bun she had just twisted into my sleek, ebony hair.

“Sorry, Edith,” I apologized halfheartedly. “I think we can both agree that this isn’t the most flattering look. The braids are nice, but the whole kingdom knows that my hair is one of my best features. If it’s all tucked away, then my face has to do all the work, and smiling can get exhausting after awhile.” I gently tucked the curls behind my ears alongside a small pearl-embellished pin.

“Yes, princess, please forgive my ignorance,” Edith replied in a shaken voice. Today was the young girl’s first day working without supervision, and she still hadn’t quite grasped the unspoken rules that existed in my presence.

“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself! I’m not going to throw you into the dungeon.” I laughed playfully, trying to help the panicked girl relax. “But you really should apprentice with the senior dressers a little longer. It took awhile to properly groom them into understanding my needs, and they never mess up my hair anymore. Don’t worry, everyone gets there with time.”

I put the pins down and slowly turned in front of the mirror, taking in the regal dress I wore. It was a dark green velvet gown with silver vine embellishments along the bodice and skirt. The heavy material was perfect for the harsh winter outside the castle walls- not that I was ever going to endure more than a few moments of the cold before returning to the sanctuary of the stone walls. However, it was always good to look the part for any visiting nobles or merchants who attended our winter events. The cold seasons always grew so dull, so the queen often held social gatherings and small feasts to connect with the royal court’s families.

I, on the other hand, could hardly be bothered with such annoying guests. All they ever did was stand around gossiping while encouraging their sons to flirt with me. Instead of bearing through the obnoxious company, I often tried to make things more interesting by creating stirs with a harmless prank or two. There was nothing quite as entertaining as watching schmoozing nobles embarrass themselves by sipping tea steeped in hot peppers or wiping their nose into peppered handkerchiefs. Most of the servants had already caught onto my tricks by now, but the court would never imagine that such a perfect princess could be up to no good. So, I continued to use my own methods to pass the time during the lifeless winters.

I performed one final twirl in the mirror before feeling satisfied with my look. I then strode across the room to where the nervous maid stood politely.

“I must say, you chose well for my dress,” I complimented, and the girl’s shy blue eyes brightened at my words. “This color truly highlights my complexion. Most of the ladies’ skin grows fair and light during the dark winters; therefore, it benefits me to wear colors that help my skin tone appear more vibrant than the other girls I’m compared to. Don’t you agree?”

The maid jolted slightly at being asked a direct question. “Why yes, Your Highness! she answered quickly. “I wouldn’t dare dress you to appear inferior to the other ladies at court. You must always look your best amongst the other members of nobility. Not that it’s difficult to achieve!” She

hastily continued, "Your Highness is already the most beautiful girl in the kingdom!" For the first time, she sounded confident, as if she'd rehearsed this moment before, whereas she had only muttered meek responses previously.

I smiled, acknowledging the girl's praise. Then I sat down in front of the vanity and began to shuffle through some jewelry.

"I'm glad you agree, but Edith, dear..." I started, "don't worry so much about trying to flatter me. I already get enough of that from the gentlemen at court." Edith froze at the subtle scolding, posing with her hands clutched tightly in front of her. Her gaze drifted to the floor with all her previous confidence shattered beneath her. I turned back to meet her gaze and softened my eyes.

"I assume the other servants trained you to compliment my every feature long before you ever saw me. While I do appreciate the kind words and attention, I prefer my dressers to be a little more honest with me. After all, if something didn't look right on me, I would certainly need to know before I ever left the confines of my suite." I took her stiffened hands into my own and smiled gently. "And relax a little, dear. I'm not going to eat you. I may be picky about my appearance but it's nothing for you to get so nervous about." I dropped the maid's hands and could visibly see her release a held breath.

"Thank you, princess. Please forgive me for fawning, I'm just a little anxious having been assigned such a high position so early," she explained with a more eased expression. "I simply hope to serve you to the extent you deserve."

"And I'm sure you will do just that. Now, would you mind assisting me?" I asked, holding up a detailed, silvery jade necklace. The girl nodded and jumped into action, helping me secure the clasp behind my neck. I smiled at her, happy to see her not as stiff. If she was going to be my dresser long-term, then I needed her to feel comfortable with me. This might be the most important role a servant could have when serving a princess like myself.

I had always known I was beautiful. Since the day I was born, news spread across the kingdom of the dazzling princess blessed to the King and Queen of Isalla. Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria, the name of King Victor's most prized treasure. No matter whom I met, my father always introduced me as the most divine creature seen by man. He would take me on trips across the country to show me off to the citizens of the land, simply to prove that he alone possessed the finest treasure. Of course, I knew he was exaggerating, at least a little. Ever since he died when I was fifteen, the servants have recited compliments to me as if I would crumble without them. I can't say for sure if I wouldn't have, though. My father's praise was all I ever truly had in life. Sure, I'm an adored, well-educated, stunningly beautiful princess, but the title doesn't exactly come with the perfect life. I only ever saw my father during dinners or when he was flaunting my beauty to the kingdom, which was rather often. Those moments of praise became my most treasured time with him. His adoration was his act of love, and when he was gone, I suppose the servants just felt I would miss that. It's not like my mother was going to give it to me.

"Done!"

My thoughts were interrupted by Edith, who had just finished securing my everyday tiara. It was a dainty platinum headpiece, encrusted with a few simple jewels that rested elegantly just behind my hairline. While I was lost in thought, Edith had completed attaching my jewelry and was now staring at me expectantly, no doubt awaiting feedback.

Wow, she had some talent when it came to adornments, as each trinket glittered in perfect contrast to the one next to it. No wonder she was assigned as my dresser at such an early age. Perhaps making friends with her would be a better idea than I had imagined, especially if she could make me

look this good.

“Perfect!” I exclaimed proudly, examining myself in the mirror. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should probably head down to breakfast. I’m sure I’m already running late.” I stepped into the satin slippers she’d set out on the floor for me, then made my way across the massive royal suite to fling open the large oak doors. I rushed through the grand corridors as quickly as deemed appropriate for a grown princess whose stomach was already growling at her to hurry. As I passed the occasional servant, I was greeted with the usual friendly comments of, “Good morning!” and “You look lovely today. Your Highness!”

I nodded my gratitude, but mostly ignored them as I strode past with my head held high. I’m not sure when it became appropriate for the servants to address me so directly, but frankly, I was getting annoyed by it. Speaking with my dressing maids was one thing- we needed to be in constant communication about the quality of my image— but being approached by housekeepers, cooks, and even the occasional guard was growing obscene. All they ever did was compliment me, just like everyone else. At this point, they should see that I get enough praise from the various suitors and court members who come during the weeks. I’ll need to have a word about their behavior with the butler, Earl. Any information told to him would get passed through the whole staff within a moment’s notice. Though he may still be a little distant from me after discovering I had poured elderberry juice into his jug of mouth rinse. The poor man thought his purple tongue was caused by a rare disease. As humorous as it was having a purple-tongued butler, eventually I had to confess when he started getting the royal physicians involved. While he wasn’t happy, he agreed not to tattle since I admitted my fault.

As I rounded the corner into the dining hall, I was surprised to see my mother already seated at the table. She sat at the far end with her gaze directly on her food, tapping her nails against the deep red tablecloth. Strangely enough, she was dressed rather incoherently. Her dress was simple, a plain sky-blue day dress with a floor-length skirt and a simple gold band circling the waist. However, her hair and makeup were done as extravagantly as if she were preparing to attend a ball. Detecting the scent of a fresh, hot breakfast, I walked across the elaborate dining hall. My eyes fell on the plate full of cooked eggs and thick toast, but suddenly, I wasn’t so hungry. *What was she doing here?* She never joined me for breakfast unless we had a visitor to keep up appearances toward, or if she had urgent news, or if I was in trouble... Anxiously, I sunk into my drawn chair as I thought through any recent pranks I had pulled. She couldn’t have known about the frog I let loose in Baroness Eliza’s room, could she? I apprehensively placed my napkin on my lap as my chair was pushed in behind me by the steward.

“Good morning, Arabella,” my mother said flatly as she stirred a lump of sugar into her tea, though her eyes never once looked up to address me.

“Good morning, Mother,” I replied, matching her flat tone. She clearly wasn’t interested in making conversation, and I wished she would just hurry and tell me what brought her here. I tried to read her expression to see if she was plotting a method of discipline, but her distant demeanor gave no clues. She didn’t appear interested in speaking until she was done with her breakfast so we sat in silence while we chewed our eggs and toast.

Queen Minerva Zakaria was a very social, charismatic woman, though you would never know it when she was with me. Even before Father’s death, we never spent time together, except when propriety called for it. Instead of being raised by my mother, I was often pawned off onto nannies, governesses, or the occasional noble family for most of my upbringing. Unlike Father, the queen didn’t like to be seen with her daughter, partially because being a mother made her feel old— at least,

that what the servants used for gossip. I never understood why though, because despite her age, my mother was still very beautiful. I got my porcelain skin and most of my features from her, but my dark eyes and hair came from my father. The queen, on the other hand, had light golden hair and shiny blue eyes, and she must have been every bit as beautiful as I when she was younger. Aside from maintaining her mirage of youth, I never fully understood why my mother cared so little about my existence. Nevertheless, she wanted nothing to do with me, and by now, I was happy to comply. Plenty of other people wished to spend their time doting on me. Why would I need a mother to do the same?

I had just finished my last piece of toast when she spoke. “Arabella, darling...”

I inwardly cringed. I hated when she called me ‘darling’ or ‘sweetheart’ or any other name that would indicate we had a relationship beyond sharing a dining table.

I looked up, swallowing the annoyance before it seeped out of my voice. “Yes, Mother? Did you need something?”

“Yes, dear, I needed to inform you that we’ll be expecting a visitor late this afternoon. An ambassador from the kingdom of Drancos.” She sipped her tea with an inquisitive look on her face, as if she was looking for my reaction before choosing her next words.

Realizing she remained unaware of the frog incident, I breathed a small sigh of relief and then chose my next words methodically. “How exciting. Did you wish for me to join you for the official welcoming?” I asked innocently. Per custom, the entire royal family was expected to greet any foreign visitors to the castle, especially those representing neighboring kingdoms like Drancos. However, I highly doubted my mother wanted me around for this visit, considering she was already taking careful effort in bringing it up. She was well aware of my antics with visitors and probably didn’t want to take any risks with my presence.

“Well,” she started, finally looking me in the eyes, “customarily I would insist you join us in order to provide a respective greeting.” I raised an eyebrow at her words, wondering how she was going to talk me out of attending. “But in this case, it would seem that the ambassador is coming to prepare for a visit from King Garrett, along with his son.” She paused, folding her hands in her lap. “I haven’t received any official news, but I anticipate the king will offer a proposition of marriage between you and Prince Jasper during their visit.”

I swallowed my tea. What exactly was she getting at? I’d been offered marriage proposals before and presented with many suitors, but none of them were ever worth my time. What did it matter if the prince of Drancos wanted to vie for my hand as well? Perhaps she worried that if I refused a proposal from a royal contender, we would risk sully diplomatic relations. The only time I had ever denied a royal betrothal was when Father was still alive, and no one had ever dared question him.

My mother’s words interrupted my stirring thoughts. “Although you have now reached the age of nineteen, I understand you still have shown no interest in marriage.” She leaned back in her chair, looking bored. “I suppose we could arrange for you to take an excursion away from the castle while they complete their visit. Then there would be no reason for the prince to establish any connection with you and request your hand. While you’re away, I would be sure to maintain proper hospitality and ensure their visit was still one that will uphold positive relations between Isalla and Drancos. This way, you’ll have a little more time to consider your marriage options before you are ready. What do you say, darling?”

I sat back in my chair for a moment, processing her words. Something didn’t make sense. Was my mother actually trying to help me? Why now? Why would she suddenly start acting like... well, a

mother. There had to be more to this that she wasn't willing to share. I searched her eyes for answers, but they were cool and even with the same familiarity as a stranger. I took a moment to consider her proposition before I grew angry. I don't know why I was mad, but it seemed unfair that the only time my mother appeared to show any concern for me was in a situation where I didn't even believe it. No, that's it. I didn't believe it. For whatever reason, she didn't want me around. She didn't want me to meet the king or prince, and I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of getting rid of me without at least a better lie. Nice try Mother, but it's no surprise that you don't know me well enough to know that I create tricks instead of falling for them.

"I appreciate the consideration, Mother, but I hardly think that's fair," I began with a devilish smile creeping across my face. "It wouldn't be right for me to run away from such an important visitor; besides, if you're right and the prince intends to on propose, then I'm sure I could politely decline without disturbing the peace terribly. Who knows, perhaps he'll be a worthy contender for a husband after all. I just can't imagine missing out on such an *important* visitation." I looked for a reaction, and I got one. For just a second, she cracked, and I saw her inattentive façade slip to irritation, but she corrected too quickly for any observers to notice.

"Very well then." Her tone was calm and collected. "In that case, I'll be expecting you in the front garden just after teatime to greet the ambassador with me this afternoon. Wear something nice, but not too flashy." She eyed my attire. "What you're wearing now will do, but perhaps less jewelry. We wouldn't want to make the wrong impression" She smiled sweetly, yet I still felt slightly offended, for Edith's sake.

"Of course, Mother, I look forward to it," I replied, matching her sweetness. With that, she gracefully stood from her chair, bid me a dull goodbye, and left the dining hall with only the sounds of her skirt sweeping the floor to mark her exit. I left moments after her, staying only long enough to finish my tea before rushing back toward my suite. Mother was planning something and if she wouldn't tell me what it was, then I suppose I would just have to ruin it. I rounded the corridor that led to my bedroom and flung the doors open without hesitation. As expected, Edith was still there, pressing wrinkles out of my nightgown for the evening. I usually spent my mornings in the parlors, so there were two chamber maids present in the midst of making my bed. Surprised by my bold entrance, they all stared at me, but I ignored their puzzled looks and ran across the large room to Edith.

"May I help you, princess?" she asked, clearly startled by my presence.

"Yes!" It had been a few days since I made a fool out of anybody, and I had an excellent plan brewing in my mind— but I needed Edith's help for it. "You coordinate with the queens dressing maids, right? You ensure that our attires never clash?"

She looked confused by my question. "Why yes, Your Highness"

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "I need you to do me a small favor. Find out what dress the queen will be wearing for the official welcoming of the ambassador tonight, then come tell me immediately." Before she could reply I spotted her small sewing kit on top of my carved wooden wardrobe and trotted over to it.

"If you wish, then yes, I should be able to inform you within the hour," she replied, still perplexed, as she watched me dig through her sewing supplies.

"That would be perfect. Thank you, Edith." I felt my fingers clasp around the tool I was searching for. "I'll just wait here until you return, and then, I'll take it from there." I spoke with a dark smile on my face as Edith wandered out the door with the two chambermaids.

"Don't worry, Mother... we'll be sure to make an impression," I whispered myself as I raised the seam ripper into my view.

chapter two

I stepped out of the queen's suite only moments before she smoothly rounded the corner, making way to prepare for the welcoming. I couldn't be seen, of course, so I quickly slid back into the room and tucked myself into the closest window alcove, pulling the satin drapes in front of me. Being a master of tomfoolery came with many useful skills, such as avoiding being seen., and I was quite adept at hiding.

The queen would need to follow her maids into the closet to get dressed, so I shouldn't have to hide for long before I could sneak out again. I leaned against the window and shivered from the cool glass resting on my spine. It was beginning to snow and the castle grounds radiated in white from the frosty blanket coating the gardens. The door swung open as the queen entered with her two favorite dressers, Olga and Helena. Both ladies had served the queen since before I was born and held her full trust. However, they had always held a soft spot for me when I was younger.

When I was a girl, the two servants would often bring me assortments of my mother's jewels and dresses so I could play dress-up. I used to imagine what my mother would have looked like in them, wondering what dresses she would wear if she took me to one of her parties. Of course, that was before I realized I didn't need her. I silently hoped that the two ladies wouldn't be blamed for my antics today, but even if they were, I was certain they'd forgive me, given our history.

I peered through the drapes, and to my surprise, I saw Helena bring the gown into the suite's sitting room instead of taking the queen into the closet. She gently held the deep purple gown for the queen to see. It was slightly wrinkled after my handling of it, but not enough for anyone to notice. The glamorous dress was far from understated—it was embroidered with golden thread and bejeweled in rich red rubies with long trumpet sleeves that hung by the waist.

“Will this do, Your Majesty?” Helena asked. “We took all of your requests into consideration and believe this gown to be the most suitable option.”

She admired the shimmering golden swirls trailing the skirt. “Yes, this will do nicely.” She smiled pompously, grazing the fabric with the tips of her fingers. “I will just need one of you to touch up my hair to compliment it. I believe it came slightly loose during my morning walk. Plus, adding a few ruby hairpins would truly complete the ensemble,” she explained as the ladies helped her step out of her blue day dress. Olga muttered something about adding more pins, but I was too lost in thought to catch it.

How dare she upstage me? There was no doubt in my mind it was her intent to do so. She clearly told me to appear understated, but here she was dressing as if she prepared to attend the grandest party of the year. I bit my lip out of frustration, but quickly felt some of my anger release into twisted glee as I saw her step into her new gown. Anxiously, I watched through the drapes, hoping my hard work wouldn't be undone too soon. It just needed to last long enough for the ambassador to arrive.

“Oh my,” the queen exclaimed as Helena cinched her into the gown. “Are you sure this dress was tailored correctly? It feels a little looser than my other gowns.” I sucked in a breath, hoping my plan hadn't already been foiled. The two maids looked at each other, puzzled, but didn't get a chance to say anything. “Actually, I believe I have simply lost weight!” She grinned proudly. “I suppose my walks have been doing me more good than I had realized!” The queen laughed airily at her self-proclaimed accomplishment, and the two dressers smiled along with her. They then continued toward the back of the room, nearing the closet to allow the queen to view herself in the mirror.

This was my chance. I poked my head out of the drapes, ensuring they were out of the room before stretching my legs onto the floor. My limbs had already gone stiff from being crowded in the cold window seat. Tapping my toes quietly to life, I hurried out the door, slipping back into the corridors.

By the time I made my way downstairs to the entry hall, a bell chimed softly in the distance, signaling for tea. I suppose I wouldn't have time to change my dress before our visitor arrived. Technically, I could skip tea hour, but that might increase my odds of being suspected of mischief. So instead, I made my way to the eastern parlor and enjoyed a few biscuits and sugared tea before making my way to the front garden. Earl was already waiting for me by the door with my cloak in hand. He helped me slip on the beautiful pure white cover before escorting me out the doors into the garden where my mother already stood. She looked me up and down and seemed to notice I had neglected her advice to change my jewelry. She shot me a stern look, but I pretended not to notice. Her attire was concealed by a golden yellow cloak, so I couldn't see the tampered dress underneath. Everything seemed to be going according to plan.

I placed myself at the top of the garden steps, just to the left of my mother. From there, we could view the entire cobblestone road used for visitor entrances. The whole yard was covered in a light blanket of fresh snow that let off an enchanting glow. We didn't wait more than a few minutes before the heralds trumpeted and a luxurious coach pulled by four black horses rolled up the frosty path, pulling to a stop in front of us. The coach was followed by nearly a dozen other Draconian guards and servants on horseback, all of whom were bundled tightly in thick coats and hats where I could hardly see their eyes.

The doors on the carriage swung open, revealing a short, stout man with salt and pepper hair and a cheery smile. He proudly wore the Draconian crest on a brooch that held a navy-blue cape at his shoulder, and a matching blue scarf wound tightly around his neck. His strides were slow and choppy, probably feeling stiff from the long trip, but he didn't let any discomfort show on his face as he approached the edge of the steps. He seemed to eye-down both me and the queen as he drew near, as if to gauge whom he was dealing with upon this visit. Something about the way he looked around made me feel slightly uneasy. Finally, after he reached the bottom of the steps, he doubled his smile and lowered into a full bow.

"Greetings from the Kingdom of Drancos, your majesties. I am Sir Nickolaus Rugmere, ambassador to King Garrett Cyprus." He spoke loudly as if the falling snow risked muffling his voice. "It is my honor to present myself as a representative of my king and prince. I would like to thank you for welcoming me into the home of such distinguished royalty. Our king speaks much of your kingdom and has been eagerly preparing to meet with the enchanting queen and princess of Isalla." Mother blushed at his compliment and smiled like a giddy little girl, while I struggled not to roll my eyes at his overly flowered words.

"The honor is truly ours," the queen replied. "We are so glad to have you here with us and would like to fully welcome you into our proud kingdom. I do hope your king is able to join us soon, so we may welcome him as well." She batted her eyelashes and tilted her head slightly to one side.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Was she flirting? No, it couldn't be. My mother would never display any interest in a man like Sir Nickolaus. He was far too unattractive and low-ranking for her to even consider wasting time on, but why was she trying to act so charming? Was it to make a good impression before the king arrived? I stifled a chuckle when I remembered how well her first impression would end up.

"Please do come inside, Sir Nickolaus," she continued. "This weather is hardly suited for a

warm welcome. Allow my servants to tend to your men and horses while you join us inside for some warm drinks.”

The ambassador nodded graciously and followed us inside to the toasty castle while a few of his guard followed closely behind. I removed my cloak and made my way to the plush velvet furniture by the entry hall fire, handing my cloak to the nearest footman as I walked.

“Sir Nickolaus, please do join me by the fire, I’m sure it could do you some good after such a long winter journey.” I smiled kindly and gestured to the lavish armchair positioned by the hearth.

“That sounds wonderful, thank you very much, Your Highness,” he said gratefully as he approached the fire and settled into the chair. “And might I be so bold to say, Princess Arabella, that the rumors of your beauty do not serve you true justice.” He respectfully bowed his head.

“Why thank you, ambassador. That’s very kind of you to say.” I put a hand on my cheek to fake a blush. I tried to sound genuine, but it was difficult not to appear bored. I settled onto the sofa across from Nickolaus and looked up just in time to see a footman walk off with my mother’s cloak. The moment I’d been waiting for all day had finally arrived, and it didn’t disappoint.

Oh my. It really worked. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing and directed my gaze to the fire. Mother hadn’t noticed the change to her dress yet, and I didn’t want to be the first to point it out. I could hear her footsteps striding proudly, probably expecting an awestruck reaction from the ambassador over her richly designed gown. The ambassador turned his head at the sound of her footsteps, and I watched in full glee as his jaw dropped to the floor.

“Oh my, Sir Nickolaus, is everything alright?” the queen asked with a blush, posing with her chin held high and a hand gently gracing her hip. I bit my lip trying to hold in my bursting laughter.

“I—I beg your pardon, Your Majesty,” he managed to stammer, “but I believe... ahem, there has been a malfunction in your wardrobe.” His face turned a shade of red that would put an apple to shame.

She then shot a glance down at her dress and screamed in horror. This, in turn, alerted every servant in the surrounding area and chaos unfolded within the castle.

The queen’s dress was quite literally falling off her. The once beautiful trumpet sleeves lay in cleanly separated pieces, now hanging loosely off her arms. The detailed bodice was in a similar state, with neatly cut pieces drooping over the line of her skirt, exposing her cream-colored corset almost entirely. Her skirt was covered in slits that bared her petticoat when she moved. It was as if the dress had never been stitched together at all, but instead, all the pieces had been laid upon the queen’s body and left to the fate of gravity. Or... as if someone with a seam ripper had gone through the dress and methodically ripped out every fourth stitch...

But who would ever come to that conclusion?

At the queen’s cry, the ambassador raced to his feet and searched for something to cover her exposed undergarments with. The servants all flew around in a complete panic, trying to console the queen. The footman suddenly rushed back into the room, holding the queen’s winter cloak, then passed it off to the ambassador like a game of ball. Sir Nickolaus sharply turned to run back toward the now bawling woman, but instead, collided full force into a steward holding a tray of hot tea. The sound of smashing china echoed through the entry hall, along with the wails of Sir Nickolaus crying out in pain from the burning liquid. He dropped the cloak to the ground and frantically wiped at the scalding tea that had splashed his face. Like magic, Earl stepped into the fray and in the blink of an eye, had placed a cool towel in the ambassador’s arms and was holding the freshly tea-stained cloak. He threw the garment over the queen’s shoulders and stepped back into his place along the walls just as quickly. He then cleared his throat loudly, causing the staff to suddenly remember their sanity and

settle back into their roles. The ambassador looked up from the towel Earl had given him, his face red with heat. I don't remember standing, but I was now only feet away from my hunched over mother.

Oops, things may have gotten a little out of hand. I'd only meant to embarrass her, not stir the entire castle and burn the ambassador. As the chaos calmed back down, I watched as my mother slowly rose her crumpled form off the floor.

"Mother?" I asked quietly, cautiously reaching a hand toward her. "Are you alright?"

She shot up to her full height. Her blues eyes were blazing down on me with a fury I had never seen before. I took an involuntary step backward.

"Arabella," she said the name with an icy resonance, "go to your suite immediately. I will speak with you shortly." And with those words, she turned from the room and left without as much as another sound. I stood frozen for a moment before remembering I wasn't alone. I looked up at the ambassador, who appeared just as stunned as I felt. I stared back with a blank expression.

"Please excuse me," I said in a shaky voice before turning to leave without giving him a chance to reply. The walk back to my suite was similar to walking on haunted ground, and all the typically friendly servants wouldn't even look up at me. News passed quickly through the castle when Earl was involved. The only sounds heard were those of my slipper soles tapping against the polished marble floors. As I passed by many of the windows, I could see the sky had grown much darker, and the snow was beginning to stick to the corners of the frames. When I stepped into my room, I found it was empty. The usually bright, comfortable space felt cold and desolate. I paced the floors for a bit, wondering what my mother was going to say when she finally graced me with her fury. Did she know for sure it was me? Or was she simply assuming because of my history with pranks? Either way, the situation did not appear to lie in my favor. I was midway through creating a fake alibi when there was a knock on my door. I swallowed hard, and my stomach knotted up as I faced forward.

"Come in," I said in as strong of a voice as I could summon. The door creaked open slowly, and I prepared for the scolding that was to come, but it wasn't my mother who stepped into the room.

It was a knight, dressed head to toe in silver armor that was polished so brightly, it reflected as well as any mirror. We had many knights who protected the castle, but they usually didn't wear full armor unless they were expecting a threat. I couldn't help but wonder what he was doing in my suite.

Did my mother order him to come? It would be just like her to pawn my discipline of onto somebody else instead of actually teaching me like a real parent.

"Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria, I have been sent to escort you out of the castle immediately." His flat spoken words rang in my head for a moment. Escort me? Escort me where? What in the realms was this man talking about?

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I'm going to need a little more information before I follow you into the snow. Did the queen send you? Does she think shipping me off will magically fix everything? Or is she really that angry that she doesn't even care how the king and prince of Drancos will respond to my absence!" I threw my hands into the air. I couldn't believe she sent a knight to collect me instead of at least talking with me first.

"Princess, I don't believe you grasp the gravity of your situation," he said calmly. Now he was getting on my nerves.

"Oh, is that so?" I chided. "Then please, good knight, do tell me what information I am lacking." My tone was mocking, as I was not about to be lectured by a knight who didn't even know the full story.

"Yes, the queen sent me," he began, my blood already boiling, "but she sent me to move you for your own safety." My anger froze momentarily. *Safety?* Why would my safety matter right now?

“The palace guards have uncovered the true reason behind the ambassador’s visit. He was sent to scout our kingdom and report back on whether it would be more beneficial for Drancos to proceed with an alliance or to simply conquer it for themselves.”

My anger melted away and was replaced with fear. Conquer? Isalla had always been known to be one of the most powerful kingdoms in all the lands, my father made certain of it. Wait... does this have to do with our lack of a current king? Surely that wouldn’t make a kingdom vulnerable

“The queen fears that after the events of this evening, the ambassador will submit a recommendation for war out of anger and with his injuries, he’ll have visible evidence to convince the king if he so chooses.”

The burn marks. Would Sir Nickolaus truly wish to spark a war over such a small incident? It seemed like such an overreaction, but the idea of war was a terrifying thought either way.

“I have been instructed to move you to a safe location until the queen is certain of King Garrett’s intentions with Isalla. If they truly do wish to take over our kingdom then your life is not guaranteed, princess.” He spoke those last words with eeriness and I gulped. This couldn’t be real. “Please, princess, for the sake of your kingdom’s future, I need you to come with me at once.”

I don’t remember what I said next. I don’t remember putting on my boots or grabbing my cloak. I don’t remember being hurried through the dark across the frozen ground and into a simple carriage hidden just off the iced-over garden. However, I do remember the heart-wrenching feeling of seeing my home fade away into the snow.

chapter three

This carriage wasn't like the ones I was used to. The seats weren't padded like the ones in the royal coaches and the walls were not insulated, so it was very cold. I huddled up in my cloak, thankful for the thick velvet dress Edith had chosen for me. I thought back to this morning. If only my mother hadn't been so... impossible! Then I would be home, in my bed, snuggled up warm in one of my soft silk nightgowns. I shut my eyes and tried to imagine that I was lying under my blankets, but the bumping of the carriage made it impossible to find any comfortable position. I finally settled on leaning back as far as I could and propping my boots up on the bench across from me. It certainly wasn't lady like, but I was alone, and it was far too dark for anyone to see inside the carriage window- not that there was anyone to look in. We had made it safely outside the capital and all I could make out under the moonlight were trees and a few lamps from scattered homes in the distance. I let my mind wander about where I was being taken to. Perhaps the summer estate? Father used to take me there for a few weeks during the summer when I was a little girl. He would always invite a few lords to join him on his summer hunting sprees. The wives would all stay behind and take me shopping or let me ride my ponies. The estate itself wasn't anything special. It only had six bedrooms, two parlors, and only a small pond out back, but it was quaint and would be a good spot for a princess to hide. I tried thinking of other potential locations I would be taken to when I felt my eyelids grow heavy. It was still cold and I was very uncomfortable, but after a little more rocking of the carriage, I let myself drift into a rough sleep.

I startled awake at the sound of the carriage door being thrown open. It was still dark out and my eyes hadn't yet adjusted to being awake, so I rubbed at them sleepily as I sat up to establish my bearings.

"Where are we, knight?" I yawned, stretching my arms and finally opening my eyes. I looked at the shiny metal man and then stopped breathing. It wasn't only his armor that was glinting off the moonlight. He was holding a dagger up to me, only inches from my heart. "What are you doing?" I squeaked the words, shaking both from the bitter winter cold and my newfound fear.

"Don't speak," his words were cold and lifeless, "just listen."

I nodded my understanding. I clutched my cloak so tightly I began to feel my fingers freeze in the position. Was I about to die? I shook violently with the thought.

"I'm not from your kingdom," he explained. "I'm an assassin from Drancos, sent to kill you before the king and prince arrive." I could only see his steel blue-eyes through the slits in his armor, and they were stone-cold with severity.

I began to cry. Was this what my mother was trying to protect me from? Or maybe she didn't even know what Drancos was planning. The man said he wasn't an Isallan knight. Was he working alone? Were they going to kill my mother, too? My tears warmed my frozen cheeks as they fell, but the assassin before me paid no attention to my cries.

"I take great pride in hunting down my victims, but you were no challenge." He eyed me with annoyance. He spoke as if he was disappointed that I was too easy to kill. "I desire more excitement in my hunt than a pompous brat can offer, so princess, I am offering you a chance at escape."

I gasped through my tears. It sounded like he was going to let me run just so he could catch me again, delaying my death long enough for me to potentially freeze in the cold on my own. My breathing grew unsteady as panic filled my every bone.

"So, here's my deal, princess. I'm going to let you run, and after twenty-four hours, I'm going to

come looking for you, just like a game of hide and seek.” I couldn’t see his mouth, but I imagined a sick smile on his face. “If I can’t find you after fourteen days, then congratulations, you win. I’ll return to my kingdom and explain that you got away, but if I find you...” he raised the dagger to my throat and my breath hitched, “then I’ll finish the job I was assigned.” He dropped the dagger and took a step back. I allowed myself to breathe again, filling my lungs with the icy air.

“Time starts now, princess. Better start running.”

I didn’t move at first. How could I? I was completely swallowed in fear and shaking so intensely, it was a miracle I could even stand at all. I forced my trembling legs to obey my wishes as I stumbled out of the carriage. On my first step into the snow, my right leg failed me and I fell. I heard the armored man laugh mockingly behind me as I scrambled to my feet and ran toward the forest as fast as they would carry me. The ground was slick and uneven, so I spent more time struggling to stay on my feet than moving forward. I was completely and utterly lost. The white snow reflected enough light that I could, at minimum, see the ground I stepped on, but the rest of the world around me was pitch-black. Every sound made me jump, wondering if it the assassin had changed his mind about letting me run. I couldn’t feel my hands or feet anymore, but I kept pushing forward. I kept going until my legs refused to take another step.

I sat on the snow, trying to catch my breath. The snow was thick, but I sank down low enough to feel the wet mud underneath seep onto the rear of my cloak. The frigid air burned my lungs, but soon enough, my gasps slowed to deep breaths. I was so cold. I reach up to my ears and removed my frigid diamond earrings. That was a little better. I then pulled off my remaining ornaments and slid them into the interior lining of my cloak. I paused before removing my tiara, and a single tear slid down my cheek. My hands shook violently as I pulled the beautiful headpiece from my hair and turned it in my hands to look at the front of it. The cold metal on my skin served as a harsh reminder that this was really happening, and I wasn’t going to awake from this nightmare anytime soon. I stuffed the offending reminder into my pocket with the rest of the jewelry and laid in the snow. I hugged my legs as tightly to my body as I could in an attempt to warm myself. No matter how snugly I wrapped my cloak around my body, I couldn’t stop shaking. At this rate the cold was going to kill me before the assassin got his chance. I stayed on the ground until I became too exhausted to shake anymore. My entire body was growing damp from the snow and soft ground. My eyes began to drift close in defeat when suddenly, the loud bell of a clock tower chimed in the distance.

I sat up slowly, looking around as if I could see the sound. The bell continued to chime until it had completed five distinct rings. I turned my head in the direction of the sound, now certain of where it came from. There must be a clock tower in that direction and maybe even an entire town. If I could make my way there, then perhaps I could find help. I picked my feet up and began moving again, but much slower this time. My steps grew painful as my ankles grew stiffer from the cold seeping into my boots. The pain made it harder, but I had a spark of hope, so I didn’t let up. By the time I heard the clock chime again, I could see the burning street lamps of a small village. I wanted to scream with joy, but my voice remained mute from the cold. It was barely sunrise when I finally found myself standing on a real road. I’d never been to a village on my own before, or at all really. I’d been shopping in a few well-known towns outside of the capital, but they were in far better condition than this place. The buildings looked sturdy but suffered from a lack of maintenance. Their bricks were worn, and heavy snow weighed down the roofs, though they still held up. Across the road I could see the clock tower atop what appeared to be an inn that exhibited as much charm as the rest of the village. I figured that would be a good starting place to look for help and would at least be warm.

I slowly shuffled across the cracked cobblestone until I reached the inn’s front door. I pushed the

door open and was immediately surrounded in the most amazing warmth. My skin tingled from head to toe as I felt the radiating heat engulf my aching body. A massive fire burned within a brick fireplace in the back corner of the small entry room, and I instinctively moved closer. I raised my stiffened hands to the flame and wiggled them slowly as life flooded back into the tips of my fingers. The fireplace was nestled in what appeared to be the dining portion of the main room. There were worn tables and chairs, along with a few scattered cups left strewn about the various surfaces. On the other end of the room by the entrance was a cluttered front desk with a service door behind it. I made my way to the desk and noticed a small hand bell with the words "Ring for service" written on the handle in blurred ink. I picked up the bell and gently shook it, creating a delicate ringing noise that echoed through the room. I could hear a noise from behind the service door as the bell fell quiet. The door popped open and a middle-aged man with a scraggly beard stepped behind the desk with a sleepy look on his face.

"Can I help ya, miss?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"Um yes, I'm looking for some help." My words came out raspy. I realized that the last time I had spoken was right before a dagger was held to my throat. I shuddered at the thought.

The man eyed me up and down, raising an eyebrow as he did so. It was only now that I realized I was an absolute mess. My once white cloak was stained with mud and covered in wet leaves from my hike through the woods. A few stray sticks clung to the hem of the cloak and my previously styled hair now stuck to my face in wet clumps.

"I ain't got any vacancies tonight. You'll have to look elsewhere, missy." I had to stop myself from scrunching up my nose in distaste at the man's atrocious grammar.

"Ya can stay by the fire until the sun rises, but then I'm gonna have to ask ya to leave before breakfast hour. I run an honest establishment and don't wanna scare off my guests with a filthy wood runner." The man pressed his hands on the desk and laughed loudly. How rude could one man be! I was tempted to give him an earful about whom he was talking to when I remembered my predicament.

If I told this man or anyone else who I was, then that assassin would have better a chance of finding me. I bit back my desire to give him a piece of my mind and tried again. "Please, sir, I'm afraid I got lost on my travels and need to find a safe place to stay for awhile. Only a few weeks and then I'll be on my way. I don't exactly have money on me, but I do have these." I pulled out the earrings, necklace, and bracelets from my pocket, but kept the tiara out of sight.

The man's eyes grew large at the sight of my jewels and looked to me inquisitively. "Eh, you didn't steal those trinkets, did ya? Cause I earn an honest living and I won't be gettin involved in anything that's gon' get me in trouble." The man took a few steps back and crossed his arms disapprovingly.

"No, sir, I didn't steal them, I swear." I wasn't quite sure how to convince my innocence to him. In his defense, I was a dirty stranger who suddenly showed up with no money and a handful of expensive jewelry. Even rich ladies who could afford such jewels would have at least a few coins on them. I couldn't exactly tell him where I got them from either, so I decided to change the subject. "If you won't accept my payment, then do you know someone nearby who will? I'm in desperate need of proper accommodation."

The innkeeper laughed heartily at my inquiry. "Hah! Ain't that a hoot! I don't know about any proper accommodation, but I think I might know of a job for ya that would get ya a warm place to sleep and a couple meals." He jumbled through the papers on his desk as he spoke.

A job...I gulped. That wasn't exactly what I was hoping for. I had never worked a day in my life and certainly didn't have any skills worthy of getting hired.

“ere ya go!” He handed me a crinkled piece of paper. I took it apprehensively and read the bold ink at the top.

*Woodlands Laundry Mill: Launderers Needed! Five silver coins and one hot meal a day!
Sleeping accommodations available!*

“Is it just washing clothes?” I grimaced. The thought of dealing with other people’s dirty laundry was probably the second sickest feeling I’d had all day- second only to being threatened with death.

“Pretty much. They mostly just wash the soldiers’ uniforms from the outpost a few miles north. They’ve been stationed ‘ere since the beginning of winter and have brought a lot of business to that old mill this season, so they’ve needed extra hands. If you follow the road and take a left at the apothecary, you’ll see the mill in about ‘alf a mile. Tell ole Franklin that Wilson sent ya, and I’m sure he’ll give ya a shot.” He sat back on a creaky wooden chair behind him and leaned so far back, I thought he was going to fall.

“Uh, thank you. I guess I could give him a visit.” I tucked the flyer inside my cloak and headed toward the door. I groaned at the thought of working for the next two weeks, but it’s not as if I had any other options.

“Good luck, little miss!” Wilson called as I headed for the door. “Oh, and don’t go flashing those fancy jewels around ole Franklin. He’ll call ya a thief and steal them from ya himself!” The man roared in laughter, nearly tipping out of his chair in the process.

“I appreciate the warning.” I paused at the door before leaving, and spun around to face Wilson again. “Oh, and one more thing...” I added as he was finishing up his chuckle. “If anyone stops by and asks if you’ve seen anyone with my description. could you...” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking. I couldn’t expect this complete stranger to keep my visiting here a secret.

“Miss,” he began in a much more serious tone, “I’m an honest man, but I do understand the impor’ance of keeping yer business private. Yer business ain’t none of mine, so I can promise that I ain’t gonna go spreadin gossip about some random gal who was lookin’ for work.” He smiled at me much more kindly than I had expected from a man who didn’t even know my name. “Now ya better get a move on. The mill opens at seven, and you’ll wanna make a good impression and show up on time.”

I smiled at him and nodded gratefully. Despite not trusting me, he had shown me far more kindness than I deserved. Guess I had to follow through with his suggestion and get a... a job. I shuddered, then pushed open the door to find my new hiding place.

chapter four

My feet were already freezing again by the time I arrived at the mill. The sun had just begun to crest over the horizon, providing a minimal amount of warmth across my face. I stood in front of an expansive wooden building with a tall, brown thatched roof and cracked, dark blue shutters covering the windows. A rusted metal sign hung above the main entrance reading, *Woodlands Laundry Mill*. This must be the place. Why did it have to look so... indecent? Unhygienic? No, that wasn't the word... Like the last place in all the realms anyone would expect to find a princess? I suppose that was the point. At least I could take comfort in the certainty that this wouldn't be an obvious place for an assassin to look. That was the hope anyway.

Directly behind the structure was a thin icy creek with a small water mill constructed at the widest part of a tiny frozen waterfall. I presumed that when it wasn't frozen, it would stream water from the creek into a reservoir at the back of the building. After completing a thorough analysis of my potential place of employment, I finally walked up to the door and pushed my way inside. A small bell hung above the doorway that chimed quietly as I pushed the door against it. As soon as I stepped across the threshold, the strong scent of cleaning solution slammed my senses. The room I stood in was cramped with a massive front counter that took up a majority of the space, along with two tiny wooden chairs stashed in the corner. There was a door nestled behind the counter that presumably, led to some sort of office. A second door was located only a few feet to my left with worn lettering across the front that read, "Staff Only," I stood alone for a moment taking in my surroundings when I was interrupted by the opening of the office door.

The man who stepped out looked to be about the same age as Wilson, but he was evidently far cleaner and well-kept. His dark brown hair and beard were trimmed and tidy, and his clothes were spotless and well-starched. He wore a monocle over his right eye that connected to a copper chain pinned to his breast pocket. The well-tailored vest he wore expanded slightly from his wide build, yet rested at the perfect length for his tall frame. His expression was sour at first, however, he quickly plastered a grin to his face upon seeing me in the waiting area.

"Good day, miss," he said with forced chivalry while straightening his already perfect vest. "Will you be in need of some laundering services today? I bet we could scrub up that nice cape of yours, good as new!" His enthusiasm was so exaggerated, I thought his eyes might pop out of his head.

"No, sir, I'm not actually here for your services." I stood a little straighter, made appropriate eye contact, and smiled warmly. If I was going to apply for a job, I needed to make a good impression — and that was something I knew how to do. "I was informed by Mr. Wilson that you're looking to hire some extra help." I passed him the flyer without breaking eye contact. His fake smile dropped as he snatched the paper from my hand.

"Yeah, you heard right." His smiling façade completely vanished. "I need some more gals to do pick-ups and work the washboards. You got any experience?" He eyed me curiously, looking up and down at my dirty attire. Applying to work at a laundry mill in a filthy cloak probably wasn't the best idea.

"Not specifically in laundering," I answered honestly. If I was going to hide here for a few weeks, I couldn't risk starting off with too many lies. One of the tricks to good diplomacy was to always be honest where you could afford it then redirect any unwanted questions. "I've had some experience working with dressing maids, so I'm well-educated about clothing in general. My previous position had a separate staff to do the washing." I stretched the truth as smoothly as I could.

With any luck, my knowledge of fashion and fabric qualities would help improve the realism of my story. After all, no one could spot a cheap fabric across a ballroom as quickly as I could.

“Very well then,” he replied, looking slightly less critical. “I’ll let you on for now. I need the help too badly to be picky. You can train with Hazel for the first few days, and if you’re able to carry your own after that, then I’ll let you stay on for good.”

I smiled gratefully in response as he opened a drawer behind the counter. He pulled out a slip of paper with a list of names written down the left side. Grabbing a quill, he dotted it in a fresh well of ink before he positioned it at the bottom of the list.

“I’m Franklin Dwarfer, by the way.” He stretched out a hand in greeting without looking up from the paper.

I took it and gave a firm handshake in return. “Pleasure to meet you Mr. Dwarfer, I’m Ar—”

I hadn’t even thought about creating a fake name. I paused, startled that I had nearly spouted out my real name. I was going to have to be more cautious if I valued my life. There was going to be a man hunting for my heart within the next day and I didn’t need to leave him any additional clues than I already had. Remembering the armored man sent a wave of nausea through me.

Mr. Dwarfer looked up from his paper conveying a look of suspicion.

“Ar... A—Annie! My name is Annie.” The name exploded out of my mouth before I could consider saying anything else. “Please forgive my stutter, I’m still a little shivery from the cold.”

Mr. Dwarfer looked a little less skeptical, but his hand remained paused above the paper with his ink drying at the tip of the quill. I swallowed nervously.

“Well?” he questioned impatiently. “Are you going to tell me your last name so I can add it to my staff log?” He gestured readily at his paper.

“Oh, of course!” My reply was hasty, and I froze on the question. How did one create a last name in a moment’s notice? My mind frantically searched for an answer. His questioning gaze intimidated me and I stupidly blurted out, “Ivory!”

Great. Now I had gone and done it. How could I have possibly given this man my real name? I kicked myself mentally for my foolishness. I might as well have just engraved my own tombstone.

“Annie Ivory?” Mr. Dwarfer questioned with hesitation. He looked up at my face for confirmation.

“Yes sir, Ivory.” I confirmed in a quiet voice not wanting the name to be spoken any louder.

“Well, Ms. Ivory,” he jotted down the name at the bottom of the list and then tucked the paper back inside the drawer, “if you’ll follow me, I’ll introduce you to some of your fellow workers and we’ll get you situated.”

He clicked open a small hatch on the counter that flipped open like a trap door which allowed him to step out from behind the desk. He ushered me toward the staff door and opened it as wide as the cramped space would allow, then gestured at me to step through. When I crossed the foreign space the strong scent of cleaning solution doubled in strength. My eyes and nose burned from the powerful smell, but Mr. Dwarfer didn’t seem to pay it any notice.

“Girls! Round up and meet me by the lockers!” His sudden shout made me jump. The workspace was lofty and wide, but his strong voice carried across the entire room.

He led me deeper into the space and I took in my surroundings. Despite the clean smell, the place was filthy. Just inside the entrance, crates, bags, and boxes overflowed with soiled laundry. The grungy fabrics spilled onto a large portion of the floor, soaking up portions of wet spots that stained the stone floor. The wall next to it was lined with shelves stocked with various soaps and perfumes, most of which looked empty and discarded or half-spilled onto the floor, mixing with the other

mysterious puddles. I could see the water reservoir that attached to the exterior wall on the other side of the room. It appeared to have been made of some sort of metal, but it was hard to tell under all the rust and flakey paint that covered its surface. Half a dozen basins filled with soapy water sat on the sticky ground, each paired with a pile of dirty laundry and a washboard. As we approached the back of the building I had to duck to avoid colliding with the soggy garments hanging from one of the clotheslines that spanned the length of the room. By the time I raised my head, I was staring straight at a group of women who had gathered in front of a rickety row of cabinets. They all wore their hair up in tight buns and donned the exact same light blue dress and white apron. At first glance, there appeared to be only six of them, but then I noticed a seventh looming in the corner on a stool. Their eyes shot straight to me as I approached with their boss by my side. They eyed me carefully, each with a different look of confusion at my arrival.

“Girls, meet the new hire, Annie,” Mr. Dwarfer introduced plainly. “She hasn’t worked at a mill before, so take it easy on her for a few days while she adjusts.”

I tried to smile politely at my new companions, but they didn’t appear to be amused by my greeting, except for one girl, who gave me a friendly wave of welcome.

“Hazel, you’ll be training her for the next week.” He pointed toward the petite girl who had waved. She had red hair, green eyes, and adorable freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. She appeared to be the youngest of the group possibly no more than fifteen years old.

“Yes, sir!” she replied in a chipper voice, smiling brightly. “You can count on me to whip her into shape!” The young girl gave a quirky salute, and I couldn’t help but smile back at her awkwardness.

“Good girl. Make sure you take her with you when you go on your routes. She’ll be accompanying you on the deliveries from now on, so show her around the shed, too.” He waited until he got a nod of understanding from the small girl before he continued. “If any of you have further questions, I’ll be in my office until lunchtime. Otherwise, please resume your tasks. There’s plenty of work to be done before we’ve reached suppertime.” With that final statement, he spun on his heel and walked back the way we came in, leaving me alone with the women.

I stood there for a moment, not quite sure what more to say. Luckily for me, one of the older women of the group moved forward I had to fret for long. “My name is Daniela; it’s lovely to meet you, dear.” She gave me a soft smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes sweetly. “We appreciate you arriving when you did. As I’m sure you can see, we’ve had more work than we can keep up with these last few weeks.” She gestured toward the piles of clothes at the front of the room, and I shuddered at the thought of dealing with it.

“I’m Hazel! Oh, but you already knew that!” the eager girl piped up. Her short stature and childlike energy only confirmed my suspicion of her young age. “This here is Bethanne, Sylvia, Delilah, and Susan.” She pointed down the line, one girl at a time. They all looked to be close to my age, varying only a few years in either direction. “Last but not least is Glenda over in the corner.” She pointed to the cross-looking woman sitting on the stool. She was older than the other girls, but not as old as Daniela. She scrunched her face up at me and stuck her nose straight up in the air when I looked toward her. “She warms up to people slower than most.” Hazel shrugged, earning herself a glare from Glenda. “Come on! I’ll give you a tour.”

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me across the entire workspace explaining every aspect in more detail than I could have ever thought necessary. The other girls returned to their respective duties and busied themselves with scrubbing clothes, mixing soaps, or boiling water over a small fireplace beside the reservoir. Hazel continued to explain which oils were okay to mix in

certain solutions and which mixtures needed to be kept far away from the fire. When we finally reached the back of the building, she practically shook with excitement.

“Oh! I nearly forgot to tell you about the accommodations. Unless you already have a place to stay... Do you?” She looked at me with wide eyes.

“I do not,” I replied simply. “I was informed I would be provided with accommodations if I was hired on.” I recalled back to my conversation with the innkeeper.

“Oh, how excellent!” Hazel exclaimed as she grabbed my hand and bounced happily. “You can stay here with us! Daniela and Glenda have their own homes in the village, but the rest of us stay here and sleep in the laundry at night! Mr. Dwarfer is very generous to let us stay, and he even provides us with dinner in the evening. Given it was a good day of work, of course.” She smiled cheerfully, but I just stared back blankly.

Sleep in the laundry? She couldn’t possibly be serious. This had to be some sort of joke. Suddenly my inner conscious kicked in for all the times I had pulled cruel pranks on people at the castle. If I made it out of this situation alive, I would repent to each individual I had wronged, because clearly this must be my punishment for it all.

“Sleep in the laundry?” I questioned her fearfully, afraid to hear her response.

“Oh yes!” she replied enthusiastically and I felt my last shred of dignity drop out of my body and shatter on the floor. “But not in the clean laundry, of course. Mr. Dwarfer would have a cow if he caught us sullyng the clean clothes. We sleep over by the entrance on the piles that still need washing.” She pointed to the other end of the building where the stinking mounds lay on the floor.

I could feel the blood drain from my face.. “I see,” I replied flatly, fighting the urge to gag and trying to keep my composure intact.

“Oh it’s not so bad!” she retorted, clearly seeing through my act. “Plus, you get your own locker to store your personal belongings.” She whirled around and opened one of the cabinets for me to see. I had to admit, it was rather spacious for a cabinet, but the hinges were coming loose and the knob was missing, so she had to pull it open with her fingers. “This one can be yours; it’s right next to mine!” She opened up the neighboring cabinet, revealing her neat pile of folded clothing, a wadded-up leather bag, and a small stack of books.

“Thank you, Hazel,” I said genuinely. “I look forward to sharing a border with you. Perhaps this shall mark our official alliance?” She laughed a little too hard at my joke, but it was nice to feel like someone enjoyed my company.

“All you need is a uniform!” She opened another cabinet at the end of the row revealing a pile of folded blue dresses and aprons. “Pick whatever sizes you think will fit best. There’s an outhouse around back you can get changed in. Once you’re done, come meet me by the fire and we’ll get you started at a basin.” She flashed one more grin, then scurried off toward the fireplace.

I took a deep breath, my nose still slightly stinging from the strong odors. Could I really do this? Could I really handle working here for the next two weeks? Or would I be killed before I even made it that far? My stomach lurched at the thought. I remembered what had brought me here in the first place. The knight from Drancos... If I shut my eyes, I could still make out the silver knight and his matching dagger perfectly. I was so foolish to have trusted him. I should have asked more questions or requested more guards, or even asked for his name. If I had put even a moment’s thought into the situation, I may not be standing in a musty laundry mill fearing for my life.

What would the kingdom of Drancos gain from killing me, anyway? I pondered the question as I thumbed through the stacks of dresses. I held up one that was about my size and trotted outside toward the outhouse. I found the offending building and stepped inside to begin swapping clothes. I

held my nose tightly with one hand as I struggled to pull on my new dress with the other. Oh, how I missed my private washroom. I dug my fingers through my tangled hair and retrieved all the pins that had been left behind from yesterday's setting aside the embellished ones. With three pins held in my mouth I did my best at wrapping my abused hair into a tight bun like the other girls wore, securing it the best I could. Once dressed, I carefully folded the green velvet dress and wrapped my stained cloak around it so it wouldn't be seen as I carried it. The jewels and embellished pins were safely tucked away inside the cloak pocket, leaving behind only my expensive leather boots as a clue to my identity. I considered hiding them, but then I would have to go around in nothing but my stockings—and the winter was far too cold for that. If anyone asked about them, I would just have to claim they were a gift from my previous employer. That sounded reasonable, right?

I hurried out of the putrid structure and crunched across the snow to the back entrance of the mill. Once inside, I stored my belongings into my newly acquired locker and sought after Hazel. She was right where said she would be, prodding at the dwindling fire with an iron poker. She saw me approach and stood up straight, smiling as broadly as ever.

“You look perfect!” she said delightedly. “Now, let's get to work!”

chapter five

I never realized how much I underappreciated my beautiful hands until now. We spent what seemed like endless hours elbows deep in murky wash basins, scrubbing unfathomable amounts of grimy fabric. My once soft, perfect hands were now red from the hot water and took on a wrinkled, leathery texture. There had been shirts, socks, dresses, petticoats, trousers, vests, bloomers, assorted linens, and even a large mass of soldier uniforms. It was official that I never wanted to go shopping again. I had seen enough clothes to know that they all blurred together at some point. We hadn't made much of a dent in the overall work mountain before Daniela announced it was time to begin the folding process. Apparently, each day concluded with all the women gathering around folding tables to sort the clothes into stacks separated by ownership. This was also a great time for everyone to catch up on the latest gossip.

I stretched out a uniform jacket and awkwardly attempted to create a decent fold. Unfortunately, all I was able to accomplish was a wrinkled lump. I sighed in frustration as Delilah reached over to show me the proper technique.

"Mr. Dwarfer wasn't joking about you never having worked in a mill before!" She giggled teasingly at me. Then she kindly modeled a suitable fold and handed the uniform back to me. "Don't worry, Annie. We all needed a little practice at first. Why, take me for example. I was completely clueless when I first started working here. I accidentally left a red tunic in the bottom of a wash basin on my first day. It wouldn't have been a problem if I hadn't dumped an entire load of white stockings in after it." Delilah blushed from embarrassment and managed a small laugh at her own expense. This sparked a small round of laughter around the tables as the other girls reminisced over the occasion.

"Honestly, Delilah," Daniela added while giving the tall brunette an amused glare, "you couldn't have been luckier that the stockings belonged to Lady Aurelia. She turned out to be quite fond of the pink color." The other girls giggled in agreement at the older woman's comment. I tilted my head in curiosity at the mention of a new name, and Hazel picked up on it immediately.

"Lady Aurelia Lockly is the daughter of the only noble family around these parts!" Hazel's voice bubbled with giddiness as she spoke, but then lowered to a whisper as she leaned over to gossip further. "Her parents own a few furniture shops around the capital so they aren't around often. Lady Aurelia grows bored at their estate, so she'll often drop off her laundry herself when her family isn't around to know."

"I cannot imagine being bored enough to desire the work of a servant," I blurted the words out before thinking them through. What had I just let myself say? Mentally cursing myself, I leaned over my work, pretending not to notice the seven pairs of eyes now directed at me. Oh dear, they had all heard me. Annie was working the same chores as a servant, so what would she know about the boredom of the nobility? My clumsy outburst hushed the room until a coarse voice broke the silence.

"I could imagine it."

The words startled me. I gazed up from my work to see which girl the voice belonged to and was astonished to see it was Glenda who had spoken.

"Luxury ain't everything, missy." Her words were cold and filled with personal sensitivity. "Working hard comes with its own set of fulfillments that I believe every lady in Isalla should be educated in." Her eyes pierced through me and I shrunk down instinctively. It was almost as if her gaze cut straight through Annie, glaring at Arabella.

"Pardon my outburst, madam," I apologized sheepishly. I couldn't remember the last time

someone had commanded my respect so quickly. “I simply found it hard to believe that a lady of good standing would be willing to risk her reputation in such ways.” I tried to explain my thoughts, but Glenda’s stare only grew more judgmental as I spoke.

“Reputation comes from everywhere. Lady Aurelia holds great respect from the people of this village, so what’s it matter if those prissy folks down at the capital judge her for it. I think she’s already been making friends in the right places. The girl has a good head on her shoulders in a sea of air-brained imbeciles.” Glenda’s voice echoed through the mill. The other girls had long since grown silent after she started speaking— even Hazel had focused in on her folding. I let Glenda’s words wash over me for a moment. I had always been raised on the notion that reputation was power, and those with the most power were the ones suited to rule others. What was the benefit in gaining a reputation with people who held no power? I rolled the question over in my mind before deciding it couldn’t be answered by only me.

“Do you truly believe she gains more from those who have nothing to give back to her?” I asked earnestly. My voice was soft, but it carried across the tables to Glenda. All the other girls froze in response to my bold curiosity, but Glenda merely sighed.

“Child...” She let the word out slowly, her voice gentler than it had been earlier. “Nobody in this world has truly nothing to give. The difference between those at the capital and those in this room is that we ain’t seeking anything in return. We only want to look out for those we know will look out for us.” Her gaze finally left mine and she directed her attention back at the tables. Her words held a strength that still lingered in the room, and I felt it picking at my brain.

She wasn’t wrong. The people I’d been raised around had always praised my every breath, but they were chasing something in return. Men wanted to woo me for the chance at marrying into the crown, and women wanted to name-drop the princess of Isalla as a personal friend. Even my father had used my beauty as a way to leverage himself above the rest. I had always assumed those were acts of love and affection, yet I was now recognizing that I may have only been a trophy for the citizens to etch their name on. The thoughts intruded relentlessly, disregarding my attempts to push them away. No, my father loved me; he simply took pride in everything that I was, everything that I am. I gazed down at my worn hands. The girls quickly resumed friendly conversation after Glenda and I had concluded our verbal duel, but I remained silent with my heart too anxious to rejoin the chatter. Within the next hour, we had created eight tidy stacks of clothing, mine clearly being the least visually appealing of the group. We bagged the clothes and labeled them with names and addresses of the different businesses and families they belonged to. We then dragged the bags outside to a half-rotted shed that housed a large cart intended for hauling deliveries. Each girl took a turn loading their filled bag onto the cart, with me adding mine lastly on the top.

“Excellent work today, ladies,” Daniela praised as we stepped back inside into the warmth. “I’ll get a pot of tea boiling. Bethanne and Sylvia, you two start on supper. The rest of you can tidy up around the place until the food is done.” The group split off and I trotted behind Hazel, following her lead as she dumped the wash basins down a grated drain on the floor. I hadn’t realized how terribly hungry I was until the scent of a simmering stew lingered throughout the building. My mouth began to water as I watched Sylvia drop sliced potatoes into a boiling pot of water. It had been a full day since I had last eaten tea biscuits in the parlor back home, and now my body was threatening to collapse in hunger as the smells alerted my senses. We had just begun to mop the floors when Daniela called over that the tea was ready. Bethanne tended to all the girls, serving them a steaming mug with a small slice of stale bread. I accepted it graciously and gulped them both down in the most unladylike manner I had ever displayed. The bread was tough and the tea was bitter, but they tasted delicious after such an

exhausting day. The stew was finished soon after, and each girl lined up by the fire with a bowl in hand. Sylvia spooned generous portions into each lady's bowl, accepting six sweet, "Thank you," comments. I held up my bowl to be filled and watched as the piping hot slurry cascaded into my wooden bowl. I muttered a thank you, then found a seat on the floor between Hazel and Susan.

The stew looked severely unappealing. It was brown and lumpy, with chunks of unidentified meat floating amongst chopped carrots and potatoes. I considered letting the slice of bread be my only dinner for the night, but my stomach still growled aggressively and the smell was tantalizing enough. I took a bite and was pleasantly surprised. It was bland and the meat was tough, but it tasted far better than it looked, so I decided to clear my bowl. After everyone had filled their bellies and drank through the kettle of tea, Glenda and Daniela collected their belongings from their lockers and bid us farewell for the night. We all shouted polite farewells as they made their way out the door, then continued to sit and chat about meaningless nothings until the sun began to set through the cracks in the shutters.

"We better get ready for bed," Hazel yawned dramatically toward me. "You and I are running the deliveries first thing in the morning, so we'll need to be up at dawn!"

I nodded my understanding, eager to crawl into a warm bed until I remembered what Hazel had informed me about the sleeping arrangements. We walked back to the front of the mill where the dwindled piles of laundry lay scattered. My stomach lurched at the idea of sleeping amongst someone else's sullied attire. I considered sprawling out on the stone floor instead, but it was far less appealing. Puddles of stagnant water remained around the ground, leaving no large enough dry patch for a body to lie. I watched with disgust as one by one, the girls snuggled up into a mass of the foul fabric. Most of them at least had their own blanket which they had retrieved from their lockers, making the setup look slightly less horrid, but not by much. I looked around the room in search of any kind of cover I could use to keep warm but fell short of locating anything useful.

"Hazel?" I caught the girl's attention as she made her way to her locker. "Do you know where I can find a spare blanket? I could use my cloak, but it is probably still damp from being out in the snow." I shrugged wistfully and she flashed me a smile.

"Of course, you can have one of mine!" She reached into her locker and handed me a brown fleece with a large rip down the side. "Sorry it's not in the best shape, but it's the only extra I've got. You can keep it if you'd like!" Her genuine hospitality warmed me from the inside. Is this what Glenda was talking about?

"I couldn't possibly just take it. Are you certain you won't be in need of it? The winters have grown terribly cold lately." I stretched the blanket back out to her, intending for her to take it back. I don't think I would be able to sleep if I caused this sweet girl to go cold at night.

"Nah, I'll be fine, I've got this!" She tugged a large patchwork quilt out of the bottom of the cabinet, grunting from the effort it took. "My mother made it for me when I took this job. She lives a few towns over with the rest of my family. It's plenty warm for this time of year." She held up the heavy material with a smile, almost falling over from the weight of the quilt.

"In that case, thank you." I returned her joyful expression. "I do hope I can repay you in the future."

She gave me a playful push. "Yeah right. I wouldn't expect as much as a copper coin for such an old blanket. Just knowing that it is being put to good use is payment enough." She giggled at the thought, then wadded the quilt fully up in her arms and walked back toward the beds of laundry. I brushed the old brown fleece with my thumb, feeling the worn fabric under my touch. It was no satin duvet, but it would keep me warm. Undoing my now sloppy bun, I placed the pins inside the pocket of

my apron before folding it up to put it away for the night. I made my way back to the other girls and found Hazel already cuddled up in her quilt, not even the least bit unsettled by her musty choice of bed. Admitting defeat, I took a deep breath and sat on the pile adjacent from her. I tried not to think too hard about it, but it was so lumpy and uneven, I couldn't pretend it was anything other than what it was. Fortunately, I couldn't sense any strong odors coming off my chosen spot as the scent of laundry solution still permeated the air as the dominating aroma. Tucking the brown fleece around my legs, I cautiously leaned back against the clothes, surprised at the level of comfort it provided aside from the lumps. I shifted around for a bit before finding a position that cradled me best, then shut my eyes to rest.

But sleep didn't come at first. My thoughts tumbled around too much for me to actually relax. The clock tower that had acted as my beacon echoed in the distance, signaling the hour of ten p.m. It was earlier than I usually went to bed, but as Hazel had said, we had an early morning tomorrow, and my previous night's sleep wasn't exactly rejuvenating. I shivered slightly at the memory of sleeping in the carriage, blissfully unaware that the man escorting me had intended on ending my life. Now that the day had ended and I was alone with my thoughts, I began to ponder the meaning of a Drancos knight being sent to assassinate me. It didn't make sense. Even Mother was under the assumption that the purpose of the foreigner's visit was for a marriage proposal. What did they have to gain from my death? I tossed around in my makeshift bed, sorting through all the possible motives I could conjure.

Okay, let's think.

Isalla has always been revered for our strength and power. My father spent his time as king building up our armies and displaying his might to anyone who dared challenge us. The kingdom of Drancos, on the other hand, had always been far more docile. Instead of building up armies, they gained influence by establishing alliances through trade. The land of Drancos was richly fertile and they often produced most of their harvest for the sake of trade. With both kingdom's history under consideration, I couldn't blame my mother for assuming that King Garrett had planned to propose an alliance through marriage. After all, our kingdoms bordered each other and the combination of Isalla's military and Drancos' prosperity would make the union nearly indomitable. So why would they risk losing that opportunity by killing off the only candidate for a marriage alliance? Unless...

I bolted upright, jarred by the realization I had come to. After a quick glance around the room, I took a breath of relief seeing that my jolt hadn't disturbed any of my roommates. I leaned back on my laundry mattress, my heart pumping hard in my chest. My memories replayed the events leading up to the ambassador's arrival, specifically the events involving the queen. Her new dress, the lavish hair and jewelry, her coy flirting and feigned youth... It was all starting to make sense. She wasn't truly anticipating an engagement between me and Prince Jasper, but she wasn't lying about a potential betrothal, either. She was hoping to secure the heart of King Garrett.

The Drancos king has been without a wife for almost ten years, and I would gamble she had intended to fill the role. Perhaps King Garrett was expecting this and was in favor of the union, but what about his son? I didn't know much about Prince Jasper other than he was only eighteen and maintained a friendly reputation amongst his kingdom. Maybe the king suspected that a marriage between me and Jasper would be supported more by the citizens, as opposed to a union between him and the queen. That would make sense considering the prince and I were far younger and held the duty of inheriting our kingdoms. The only thing that still didn't make sense was why the Drancos king would go as far as to send an assassin after me. If he wanted to marry my mother so badly, then why not just deny an engagement between Jasper and I?

Unless he was planning to more than just marry the queen. What if I was only the first victim and

my mother was next? The pieces started to flow together, albeit a little jaggedly. The silver knight had initially claimed that Drancos had intentions of either allying with Isalla or conquering it, but what if they were planning both? If the Drancos king were to marry my mother under the impression of alliance, and then killed her off in a tragic accident, then he would gain both the pity and support of both kingdoms over his loss. Plus, having me already removed from the picture would prevent any claims I could make to the kingdom upon her death.

It made sense. King Garrett wanted to conquer our kingdom in a way that would ensure the support of the people. If I tried to return to the castle now, he might simply kill me off with his own hands before I could warn anyone. That was if I could even make it past the hunter on the prowl for my life. Maybe he was keeping me alive as a warning to my mother? Would he force her into a marriage under the facade that he would let me return home? That idea may not be necessary considering her willingness to gain attention the day before. My head spun with all the theories, trying to make sense of it all, but no matter how many times I turned the questions over in my mind, they just didn't fill in all the blanks yet. The only certainty was that returning to the castle now would endanger my life, my mother's life, and the safety of Isalla. Until I had a better understanding of what King Garrett was planning, my best option was to hide and hope I was good at it.

Fourteen days to survive.

My time started now.

chapter six

The king surveyed the letter delivered from his covert emissary. The seal bore only the shape of plain rectangle with a few adornments on the corners. He already knew who it was from, though there was no name, nor any other identifiable information on the envelope. His newest hired pawn knew better than to contact him without adequate reasoning, so he opened the letter without delay to browse its contents.

My Eminent King,

I write to inform you that my mission has been successful thus far in regards to the assigned target. However, my actions have failed to go unnoticed by the Isallan queen. Though she remains unaware of my true purpose, she has acquired knowledge of my skills and wishes to hire me to track down their missing princess. I have informed the queen that my formal confirmation or denial of the job will reach her within the next three days. If I refuse the task, I have no doubt she will simply seek service from another source. Due to this fact, I boldly propose that you allow me to accept the queen's offer and use her faith in my skills to Your Majesty's advantage. I shall await your response before acting further.

*Sincerely,
Your Humble Servant,
-M*

The king folded the letter and paced for a moment in consideration. A decision permeated his mind an instance later, and he prepared a letter of response. He dotted his quill and wrote out a short-handed approval before placing it into his own unmarked envelope. He removed a rarely used signet ring from his desk and sealed the letter with the same rectangular emblem used on the previous note. Flaggering down his private messenger, he sent off the letter without forthwith hesitation.

“Very well then,” the king murmured to himself, gazing into his ornamental mirror. “I suppose the queen would prefer to answer our questions directly.”

No matter how fast, I ran there was always a man blocking my path, a man in silver-mirrored armor. Silently, he fiddled with his glinting dagger as he watched my movements. I turned to flee in the opposite direction, but he was still there, standing watching, laughing at me as I tried to escape him. The more I tried to run, the closer he stood, until eventually he was directly in front of my terror-stricken form. His hand lunged for my throat, gripping it tightly with a cold, gloved hand. I opened my mouth to scream, but made no sound. I trembled and clawed at the man's hand as it blocked my airway, but my efforts only drew a twisted laugh from him. I looked to him pleadingly, but saw no remorse in his eyes. There was only the cold determination of an assassin who had caught his prey.

“Times up little princess,” he spoke with sickening glee. “Ready or not... here I come.”

I snapped awake from the nightmare—the same dream of running through the forest overwhelmed my sleep. My entire body was covered in a thin layer of sweat while quivering lightly from the dream. I took an uneasy breath and remembered where I was. The morning sun cast golden light across the mill floor. The dusty shutters broke up the light into crooked slim lines, but the glow still saturated the expanse of the room. I sighed in relief, recalling the safe haven I had found. My body ached from the events of the past two days. Every bone in my body rebelled against my attempt to sit up, nagging at me to lie back down. *Why did working hurt so much?* I rubbed my throbbing foot

for a moment, trying to regain the ability to walk. As I began to press into the muscles of my sole, an abrupt wake-up call jarred me.

“Good morning, Annie!” Hazel nearly shouted in my ear. I bounded out of the laundry from fright at the shocking greeting. The fear from my nightmare flooded back to me in an instant as I jumped onto my sore feet. “You had better get yourself ready. We depart in twenty minutes!” Fully disregarding my terror, the spunky girl spun on her heel and marched toward the fire where the other girls were already freshened up and sipping mugs of tea together. I placed my hand over my chest as my adrenaline began to come back down.

“Relax, you’re going to be alright,” I whispered to myself in an attempt to lower my heart rate. Taking some deep breaths, I gathered my blanket and made my way back toward the storage space. Quickly throwing my hair up in a semi-decent knot, I managed to get cleaned up in enough time to grab a cup of tea with the girls. Susan passed me another slice of stale bread from last night’s dinner, which crunched far harder than any meal should. I still managed to chew through the stiff breakfast, then settled onto a stool while I waited for Hazel to finish her tea. As we began to chat, Glenda and Daniela walked inside through the back door.

“Good morning, ladies,” Daniela greeted with a friendly smile that contrasted Glenda’s frown.

“Good morning to you both,” Bethanne replied sleepily through the steam of her mug. “Did either of you hear any decent gossip this morning? The weekly announcement flyers should have been posted last night from the capital.” The other girls looked up excitedly from their mugs at the reminder.

“Meh. Plenty of gossip, but none of it any good,” Glenda responded with her usual gruff tone. She placed her belongings inside her locker, then joined us to pour her own cup of tea, “The blasted princess has run away... right before King Garrett was going to arrive with his son. It looks to me like the girl is too spoiled to face her duties and has run away from another betrothal.” She huffed as she filled her cup. Gasps and murmurs filed the room as the others began to theorize about the princess’s disappearance.

“Maybe she is already in love with someone else,” Susan commented dreamily. “Why else would she run away from a handsome prince? I’d bet she’s eloping!” The other girls quickly jumped on the idea and started romanticizing about a forbidden love. I smiled at the idea, but mainly avoided eye contact as I sipped my tea. Why would they announce that I had run away? Given the events that occurred before I left, I suppose it made more sense than claiming I was kidnapped.

“Doesn’t matter if the girls in love or not.” Glenda’s strong voice hushed the other ladies’ giggles. “Because of her actions, we now have the Drancos ruler arriving today to probably make an even bigger mess of things.”

“King Garrett is arriving today!?” The question erupted out of me, startling even myself. “I mean, the ambassador only just arrived. I didn’t think the king would be here for another week at least.” I tried to sound a little less desperate as I anxiously awaited her answer.

“Well, it seems like something made him come earlier.” Glenda’s eyebrows rose at my sudden curiosity, but quickly dropped back down again. “Maybe he got early word about the princess’s runaway and wanted to come to try to help find her. Coulda been anything really. These pesky royals just do whatever pleases them anyway,” she grunted as she sipped her tea.

I leaned back on my stool as I pondered the news. King Garrett couldn’t have known that I was missing so soon—it was only yesterday morning that my absence would have been noticed. He must have been planning his early arrival before he sent the assassin after me. My stomach lurched at the thought of him scheduling my death.

The conversations fluttered back to imaginative stories of the princess running away with a

beloved servant or guard. Well, they were right about me running away with a guard, but it was hardly romantic. As the chatter continued, I returned to my locker to retrieve my cloak. Using the distracting conversation to my advantage, I slid the jewelry from the interior pocket into the folds of a spare apron. At least I wouldn't be jingling with priceless gems as I rode around town. I had just shut my locker when Hazel arose from her stool.

"Alright!" She slurped down the rest of her tea and slammed the mug onto the stool, "You ready to hit the road, Annie?"

I spun around, throwing the cloak over my shoulders. "As ready as I'll ever be." My words came out partly as a yawn, and Susan yawned back sympathetically.

"Great! Then let's hit the road!" Hazel tossed on her cloak and led me out the door with a quick wave goodbye to the other ladies.

Before attending to the deliveries, we made a quick stop at the local stable where we picked up Mr. Dwarfer's dusty gray mare, Dottie. The old girl was sweet-tempered and had no problem allowing me to lead her across the road toward the mill shed. We hooked her up to the rickety laundry cart, then climbed into the narrow bench in front. We had to squeeze together to fit on the short bench, but we were both petite enough that it wasn't too much trouble.

I took the opportunity to gain my bearings on our location as we rode through town. Through the clear morning sky, I was able to make out the outline of the castle walls to the east. They weren't as close as I would have hoped, but at least I knew the direction of home if I ever got brave enough to return. Although it would be the most obvious choice for Princess Arabella to flee to the castle for help, so I could be certain that my hunter would be awaiting me in that direction. I pulled my hood down a little lower at the reminder of my pursuer. Hopefully no one would care to remember the face of a lowly laundry girl- although my face had never failed to attract attention before, especially when there was a man involved. I sunk lower into the bench at the thought. We continued on through town, stopping only a few times to leave bundles of clean laundry at the doors of neatly maintained homes. We had only gone through about half of the bags when Hazel directed Dottie down a narrow, wooded path leading outbound of town.

"Where are we going?" I inquired nervously. We both began to bounce uncomfortably on the bench as the road grew uneven.

"To the outpost, of course," Hazel informed as if the answer was most obvious. "The rest of the loads belong to them anyway so this will be our last stop." I looked behind at the large quantity of remaining bundles. It wasn't even midday yet, and we were nearly completed with our entire task.

"That was a quicker trip than I had imagined," I replied. "Why did we have to leave so early if it was only going to take us a few hours to accomplish the deliveries?" I fought a yawn as I thought back to the alluring idea of sleeping in longer.

"That's because the outpost deliveries always take the longest." She gripped the reigns tightly as we bounced over a significant hole in the path. "The captain is very social. He likes to spend a large chunk of time chatting with anyone who comes by their encampment, so that's why we have to get the other deliveries out early. If we went to the outpost first, the captain might make us run late for our other clients, and Mr. Dwarfer hates receiving complaints."

I nodded in understanding. I wonder what kind of captain would be so desperate for socialization that he would wish to entertain mill maids. Images of a stout, seasoned war hero who enjoyed passing the time by telling old war stories filled my head. Perhaps he was a typical pompous windbag who took advantage of any ear that would listen to tales of the glory days. I let my imagination wander freely as we pulled down a pebbly road that opened into a large clearing.

“You’ll like Captain Peter,” she stated with a cheeky smile as we rode up into an expansive camp site. A tall wooden watchtower stood in the midst of the clearing with a proud Isallan flag raised high. Dozens of identical tents sat beneath the tower, all spaced apart in perfect lines. There were soldiers everywhere. Some were running laps under the orders of lieutenants, while others relaxed in huddles around tents and meals. I kept my head low as numerous eyes turned toward our arrival. Hazel smiled and waved, soaking up the attention from the young men, but I wasn’t ready to risk my face being on display. At the forefront of it all was a much grander tent with three distinct peaks held up by support poles, each bearing a smaller flag at the tip. We rolled up to the front of the large set-up and pulled to a stop. I followed Hazel’s lead as she approached the entrance and stuck her head inside without even bothering to announce her presence first.

“Helloooo, are you here, Peter?” Her informality made me cringe. I wondered if the captain would feel inclined to issue a punishment on the poor girl for neglecting the use of proper manners. Before I could make any attempt to stop the hyperactive girl from dishonoring the gentlemen any further, a tall young man walked out through a fabric into the main room of the tent. My heart skipped a beat as my eyes landed on his.

Oh goodness, he was handsome. Tussled dark-brown hair and soft green eyes hid underneath his military cap. He was built broadly but was clearly in excellent shape with defined muscles creasing his uniform. He towered over Hazel and me, and his kind expression bore chiseled features I imagined not even the prince of Drancos could equate. At further glance, I noticed the adornments on his uniform that marked his rank of captain. *This was Captain Peter?* I shut my mouth once I realized it was standing agape and caught a smug side glance from Hazel. Why didn’t she warn me that he was so good-looking!

“Good morning, Hazel dear.” The captain’s voice was deep and smooth. He strode out to greet us with a polite bow that I would have never anticipated from a man of his rank. *Well, Princess Arabella would have expected it, but never Annie.* “I do hope your journey wasn’t too unpleasant. The valley has been terribly cold this winter, and I would hate to see you ladies go through the strain of bearing it just to service us.” His words dripped with chivalry.

“Oh Peter, you know we’re just fine.” Hazel giggled. “This is our job after all, but we do appreciate the courtesy. The other ladies are always pleased to hear that you care about their well-being.” She grinned like a giddy schoolgirl as she spoke. Perhaps this was the true reason why she liked to have plenty of time to visit the outpost.

“Nevertheless, we cannot thank you enough for the trouble you ladies go through to assist my men.” He smiled gratefully, flashing a row of perfect teeth. I held my ground to prevent a swoon. There had been plenty of attractive men who graced my presence before, so what about this man drew my attention so strongly? “I do beg your pardon miss, but I don’t believe we have been properly introduced.”

I jumped slightly when I realized the question was directed at me. Hazel looked to me expectantly as I tried to regain my composure.

“Oh, my apologies, captain. My name is Annie,” I gave a graceful curtsy before remembering that Annie shouldn’t be so practiced at such a skill. Despite giving an intentional wobble as I stood, he still eyed me a little more intensely. I shied away from his gaze, which must have alerted him that I was uncomfortable because he quickly spoke up.

“I am Captain Peter Williamson, but please just call me Peter, I prefer informality where I can afford it.” He removed his hat to give a second bow, but something caught my eye that triggered my full attention. In the midst of his shaggy brown hair, there was an undeniable streak of iridescent

silver. The shimmering section of hair caught the light from the oil lamps in the room before it was quickly hidden under the captain's cap.

"You're a mage!" I blurted out before I could filter them. My hands clasped over my mouth in embarrassment of my outburst. Mages were not completely unheard of in Isalla, but they were rare. Only about ten percent of the population still bore the gift to carry magic, so meeting one was often a surprising experience. I blushed in shame, but Peter only laughed warmly in response to my reaction.

"I am indeed." He spoke kindly to ease my embarrassment. "Specifically, I am a caster. My abilities allow me to pass my magic through other individuals to heal ailments or injuries." My eyes grew wide in fascination, and he smiled joyfully at my childlike interest.

There were three types of magic users known to the realms, enchanters, casters, and sorcerers. Magic had always been known as a form of energy that may only be passed through compatible source, and the compatibility of those sources depended on the user's magic.

Enchanters could only pass their magic through non living-objects. They were the most plentiful of the remaining mages and often were made of alchemists who brewed and sold simple potions. A caster's magic was the opposite. They could only pass power through living beings, such as plants, animals, or people. They were far rarer than enchanters and could vary greatly in their specific gifts. Lastly, there were sorcerers, of which haven't been seen since the downfall of the Sybetail kingdom. History claimed that their magic could only be passed through themselves and were used to amplify their own abilities based on their gifts. No matter what power they wielded, every individual who possessed magic was born with some amount of silver hair. It wasn't the type of silver that came from age, more like the glittering metal with the same iridescent shine of a pearl. Some believed that the amount of silver represented the amount of power the mage possessed. I had met an enchanter before. He was the son of a noble who tried to woo me with some simple enchantments. His skills were interesting, but the boy himself was such a bore that I didn't allow him around me for long.

"That's rather incredible," I told Peter astonished. "Please forgive my rudeness earlier. It has just been so long since I had last met someone who could wield magic. I find such abilities compelling, and my excitement got ahead of me." I lowered my gaze in apology, but he only continued to grin brightly.

"No need for apology, miss, I take great pride in my gifts and am glad to speak of them to anyone willing to listen." He moved toward the fabric curtain in which he emerged from earlier. "Speaking of which, would you two ladies care to join me for lunch while my men prepare their garments for you? Perhaps we could speak more of magic or any other topics that interest you. I will be certain to ensure my men unload and reload your cart so that you may relax while we dine."

Hazel's expression livened at the offer. "We would love to! Wouldn't we, Annie?" She looked to me excitedly and I smiled back to her.

"That would be lovely, Peter, thank you," I said sincerely. Hazel removed her cloak upon the invite and Peter politely took it from her as a proper host. Following her lead, I pulled down my hood and slipped off the stained garment, but when I looked up, the captain stood frozen. His gaze held to mine as a look of bewilderment crept across his face. Anxiety raced through me as I wondered if he had recognized me. I was certain I had never met him before, but perhaps he had seen me from a distance at another royal gathering.

I shrank back, hoping my haggard appearance would be enough of a disguise to keep me safe from suspicion. The royal army might be capable of keeping me safe from a single hunter, but they wouldn't be discreet. If the kingdom of Drancos got word that I was still alive, who knows what other

methods they would invoke against me? Right now, my best chance at survival lay in the ego of a fake knight who thought he could outwit me.

“Forgive me for staring Miss Annie...” Peter finally spoke, taking the awaiting cloak from my hands. “It is just your eyes...” his voice drifted off gently before he continued, “they’re captivating.” I sucked in a quiet breath as my heart fluttered at the flattery.

Hazel swung me a look of girlish excitement with her mouth hanging agape. Suddenly, I felt immensely relieved that he was merely noticing my feminine charms and nothing else. Although, I had to admit, he surprised me by complimenting my eyes first. Most men would comment on my hair, dress, and figure before they ever got around to noticing my eyes. Perhaps I looked worse than I thought if that was my most attractive feature at the moment.

“Oh, why thank you Peter,” I responded politely. Annie probably wasn’t used to flattery, so I needed to play the part. “That is very kind of you to say.” I lowered my eyes shyly to emphasize Annie’s newness to flirting. He nodded in polite response, yet still hadn’t removed his eyes from me. My nerves began to bubble up until Hazel broke the tension.

“So, shall we eat?” the girl asked eyeing our interaction with a smug grin. “Or would you prefer I go ahead and let you two join after you’re through conversing?” She giggled teasingly.

“No need for that, Hazel.” I met her playfulness with a serious tone. “We would be delighted to join you.” Hazel gave me one last smirk before she pushed her way through the fabric curtain where lunch would be served. The curtains fell shut behind her, so I reached out to reopen them when Peter’s hand rested upon my shoulder. I stopped my movement toward the curtain and turned to face him.

“May I help you captain?” I inquired anxiously. His hand held a firm grip on my shoulder that made me nervous.

“I believe I should be asking you that.” His vibrant green eyes were stricken with severity as he whispered, “Princess Arabella, is that you?”

chapter seven

My body stiffened at the name. What should I do? Nobody was supposed to find me. Would revealing my identity put me in greater danger? Or worse, would it threaten my kingdom? King Garrett might be at the castle by now. Would he allow me to live if he discovered the assassin hadn't finished the job? My eyes filled with panic as Peter stood firmly in front of me, his hand still on my shoulder.

"I— I am just Annie." My voice came out broken, unable to convince even myself. I glanced around the room, wondering if I should flee.

"Please, Your Highness," his voice was soft and quiet, clearly not wanting to alert Hazel of his suspicion, "I am not going to hurt you. We just received word yesterday that you ran away. King Garrett feared that you didn't leave by choice, so he ordered an immediate search for your safe return."

I stumbled backward. Somehow, I doubted the king expected me to be found alive. Or perhaps he suspected I still lived and wanted to deal with the dilemma himself.

"King Garrett is the one who forced me to run," I whispered sharply, pulling my shoulder from his grip. His eyes grew wide at my confession. There was no denying my identity now, but I wasn't going to risk being dragged to my death just yet.

"What do you—"

"Are you guys coming or what?" Hazel interrupted from the other space.

I gave Peter a look, pleading with him to keep quiet, and then turned to where Hazel was waiting. A small, makeshift dining room lay on the other side of the curtain, with large maps of the kingdom strewn across the walls. Peter pulled up a chair for Hazel and she graciously accepted his chivalry. He crossed the room and did the same for me, only it felt like it occurred in slow motion. The tension between the two of us was so thick, it was suffocating. What was he going to do now that he knew my secret?

Fortunately, lunch proceeded without any further incidents. Peter brought out neatly sliced sandwiches and fresh fruit that tasted incredible compared to the crusty bread I had eaten for breakfast. The lunch conversation revolved around meaningless nothings such as the weather, magic, and general gossip. I was finally beginning to relax in the captain's presence when Hazel soured the peace.

"So have you heard any news about the princess's runaway?" She shoveled a forkful of fruit into her mouth, looking at him eagerly. "I heard she might be trying to elope after a scandalous relationship with one of her guards." She leaned forward with curiosity, as if hoping to hear it was true.

Peter passed a subtle side glance in my direction as if to ask "What?" Thankfully, Hazel was too wrapped up in her fruit plate to notice my eye-rolled reply.

"Well, from what we have heard, the princess went missing two days ago," He avoided looking at me as he spoke. "The queen is under the assumption that she ran away due to a prospective marriage alliance, but King Garrett announced after his arrival that we shouldn't forgo the involvement of foul play. At least, that is the information that has been made available to us and the public. I cannot say anything in regards to a romantic escapade." He flashed his perfect smile, earning another giggle out of Hazel.

"Maybe she didn't want to run." My words surprised me. I wasn't sure why I felt the need to speak on the matter, but it just felt wrong hearing them talk about me when I was right there.

“Ooh that would be rather theatrical.” Hazel’s tone was dreamy. “What if the princess was whisked away by a dastardly villain, and now Prince Jasper must rescue her before it’s too late!” She swooned dramatically pulling a small laugh out of me.

“Maybe... or maybe she can save herself.” I snickered but added a hint of sincerity to my words. “I imagine she might be trapped. She may be unable to proceed forward until she has enough information to make the wisest decision for herself and her kingdom.” I caught my tongue before I could say more. Peter might have unveiled my secret, but I couldn’t risk Hazel knowing too. Across the table, Peter looked at me intensely with concern filling his green eyes. He actually looked genuinely worried about me, or Arabella, his princess. I suppose that was his job after all.

“I guess that could be the case,” Hazel piped in, breaking my focus on Peter. “But it’s far less interesting than a daring capture!” She jostled her fork toward an imaginary villain.

“That’s certainly possible Miss Hazel. I must say, I truly appreciate the vivid imagination you bring to my table.” He laughed merrily, causing Hazel and me to join in.

“You are such a schmoozer, Peter,” Hazel batted her hand playfully in his direction. “As much as we would love spending the day chatting with you, I’m afraid Annie and I should start heading back. The other girls will be needing our help about now.” She stood from the table and pushed in her chair. I followed her lead, which created an instant reaction out of Peter.

“Please, allow me.” He took the plate from Hazel. “I understand that I have kept you for too long. If you need to go prepare your cart, Annie and I can fetch your cloaks and meet you outside.” He gave his signature smile.

“Very well then! I’ll hook up Dottie and see you in a jiffy!” She whirled around and trotted back outside, leaving Peter and me alone in the lofty tent.

“We don’t have much time.” Peter’s voice came out hushed with a strong sense of urgency. “What happened? What drove you to leave the castle? And why are you posing as a mill maid?” The multitude of questions overwhelmed me, causing me to blank out for a moment. “Your Highness, please, I only wish to help.” I snapped out of my daze. He was right, and I needed to take advantage of this opportunity.

“It happened right after an unfortunate incident with the Drancos’ ambassador.” A rush of unfamiliar guilt flooded me as I recalled the events at the castle. “A false knight tricked me into leaving with him, claiming it was for my own safety, but once we got outside the capital—” I choked on my words as uninvited tears began welled up in the corners of my eyes. I wiped at them quickly with my sleeve before they could escape. “He said he was an assassin from Drancos, sent to kill me, but he was sadistic and set me free in the woods so he could hunt me down. He told me that after twenty-four hours, he would start looking for me and if I could avoid being found for fourteen days he would give up and let me go. I found shelter at the mill and have been hiding ever since. I fear that King Garrett intends to conquer Isalla by marrying the queen and killing me so I cannot claim my birthright. If he finds out I am still alive, he may take more direct action.” I let out an exasperated breath. All this information had been building up inside me for so long, and it felt good to let it out.

Peter’s face looked twisted with shock and confusion from my hasty explanation. “So, if King Garrett is truly behind this, then sending you back to the castle might only endanger you and the queen further.” He spoke calmly as if I had merely asked him about the weather. “This assassin concerns me, though. You may have hidden yourself well, but I don’t know what this man is capable of, I would prefer you remain somewhere safe for the time being. We shall hide you in our compound until we can find a safe way to remove the king from Isalla.” He nodded in agreement with himself, then began to walk off.

“But wait!” I grabbed his arm, halting him with my shouted whisper. “How do you intend to hide me from all your soldiers? The draconian knight had infiltrated the castle for heaven’s sake. Who knows how many spies are among our military. If King Garrett learns that I still live, he could very well forgo his original plans and kill my mother without hesitation. I fear that I am the only one currently ensuring her safety. As long as he assumes I am dead, he will delay any violent outbursts for the sake of forging a lawful alliance,” I looked at him pleadingly, grasping his sleeve in desperation. He visibly softened when he saw my fear. I felt exposed for displaying such open emotions in front of a man I had just met, but something about his demeanor made him easy to open up to.

“You’re right.” He sighed, gently placing a hand over mine. I released his sleeve quickly at the touch, unaware that I was still holding him. “Until I can screen my men, you should remain where you are. If there are any other spies among my ranks, then they shall not remain much longer. If your assumptions are accurate, then we cannot risk the queen’s life anymore than yours. King Garrett should have arrived at the castle by now; therefore, he is dangerously close to Queen Minerva. Tell me, princess, in your current living situation, are you safe? Does anyone else know of your location?” There it was again, that worry that gripped his soft green eyes.

“Yes, I am safe,” I replied honestly. “It is not the quality of life I am used to, but I believe I am well-concealed and I trust the other women I am with. The only other person outside of the mill who knows I am there is an innkeeper named Franklin.”

He gave a slight nod in understanding. “Very well, I keep a close eye on him.” He walked out of the curtained dining room, ushering me to follow. He led me toward a narrow wooden cabinet and opened it to reveal neat rows of paperwork and other odd items. He reached behind a stack of papers and pulled out a small metal whistle on a chain. “Take this.” He pressed the small cold instrument into my palm. “I will station men near the edge of town where the mill is located, and I will perform routine visits as well. If anything happens where you feel you may be in danger, blow that whistle. The pitch will be recognized by any of my men as a distress signal, and they will alert me as soon as it is heard.” He reached around the cabinet and pulled the two cloaks off a peg nailed into the side of the wood. He wrapped mine lightly around my shoulders and placed Hazel’s in my arms.

“Thank you.” My voice sounded quieter than I intended. It felt comforting to know there was someone who wanted to protect me. Sure, it was his job, but his actions made me feel safer than I had in days. “I must get going as we have lingered for too long.” I turned to leave. He followed a step behind me, only stepping in front to hold the tent doorway open for me.

When we stepped outside, Hazel was already sitting on the wagon bench tapping her toes with a cheeky smile sprouting from her face. I climbed onto the bench, handing her the cloak.

“I knew you two would like each other,” she whispered into my ear giddily. “Peter sure took his sweet time handing you a couple of cloaks, hmm?” She looked utterly amused at the idea of us having been alone.

“Oh quit imagining things, Hazel!” I scoffed, though I secretly hid a quick blush under my hood. “He was only caught up in telling me some old story about politics.” She raised an inquiring eyebrow at me, though she seemed overall satisfied with my response as we pulled away from the outpost. I turned in my seat to give one last wave of goodbye to the captain. He offered a friendly wave in return, but his eyes were hiding a deeper concern. Before we were out of view, I watched as he called another soldier toward him with a stern call.

“Either way, he seems rather smitten with you.” She nudged me in the ribs playfully as I turned back around. “He couldn’t even keep his eyes off you! I wouldn’t be surprised if he started making regular visits to the mill.” She giggled at the idea as we bounced back through the forest paths.

“Perhaps he will.” I shrugged. It wouldn’t be a bad idea for the other girls to assume that the captain was keen on me. That would provide an excellent alibi if he was ever noticed lingering near the mill.

Hazel gave me bemused side glances for the entire ride back to the laundry mill. I was starting to regret leading her to the idea at this point. Fortunately, it wasn’t much time before we were back at the mill. We returned Dottie to her stable, then proceeded back to the cart to unload the pungent laundry bags. The other girls helped us bring the bags in so it didn’t take long before our work pile was back to its towering height. The rest of the day consisted of more scrubbing, drying, and the usual end of day folding. Once we had all gathered around the folding tables it only took Hazel approximately ten seconds to explode with today’s news.

“Captain Peter took quite the liking to Annie today,” she said in a sing-song voice, intentionally avoiding direct eye contact with me. “He told her that her eyes were captivating.” She held the shirt she was folding just below her eyes, then fluttered her lashes dramatically. The girls suddenly all looked to me with rapt attention. I buried my face in the jacket I was holding, unwilling to face their questions. My reaction must have spoken louder than words, because suddenly, the excited chatter of inquisitive girls spread through the air.

“My, my... Captain Peter is a fine young man, Annie.” Daniela’s sweet, patient voice cut through the jabber. “He has always been good to the girls who have worked here. Never been short with us over deadlines and always invites us to his table when he can. You should be honored to have earned the attention of such a gentleman.” I poked my eyes out from behind the jacket, feeling a blush warm my cheeks. Why was I getting so worked up over Peter? He had been nice, but he knew I was his princess, so he was obviously acting out of duty. I was beginning to think that the girls’ obsession of romanticism was starting to wear off on me.

“It’s not what you think,” I answered shyly, my cheeks still hot. “He was only being polite. I don’t think he was treating me any different than Hazel.”

“Hah!” Hazel burst out laughing across from me. “Yeah, right! He even held you back inside the tent while he sent me to ready the wagon. He’s definitely a sly, one I’ll tell you that.” Once again, all eyes were on me.

“He was only telling me a story,” I sputtered my words meekly. Not even I felt convinced by the words.

“Oh, you’re so lucky, Annie!” Bethanne shrieked to my right. “I would do anything to have a man like Peter pining for me, but I’m far too shy to actually talk to any.”

I smiled sympathetically toward her. The quiet, dirty blonde seemed very much like the timid type. It was no wonder they all enjoyed living vicariously through others.

“I understand how you feel Beth,” Delilah piped in. She was pouting with her elbows supporting the weight of her held chin against the table. “I once tried talking to a man who was dropping off his suit to be cleaned. I ended up slipping on a puddle and landed on my bum right in front of him.” She threw her face down into her hands, earning a chuckle from the other girls, and I laughed loudly along with them.

I couldn’t remember a time I had simply enjoyed the company of others like this. There were no pranks or flirtatious suitors, yet here I was smiling bigger than I had in years. Was this what it felt like to have friends? We continued giggling about each other’s embarrassing stories until we heard the distant clock tower signal that it was time to end the day. We wrapped up our bundles, but this time we moved them toward the front entrance instead of to the carts.

“These loads are for pick-up,” Sylvia informed me as we placed the synched bundles in a row

along the wall. “Their owners will stop by throughout the day tomorrow, so whoever is available will just pass it off to them.”

We started to do our end-of-day cleaning while Glenda and Delilah made dinner. The smell of fresh warm bread filled the room and even overpowered the scent of cleaner as Glenda prepared a beautiful loaf. We gathered around the fire after a passable amount of cleaning had been done and watched with salivating mouths as Glenda pulled two loaves out from overtop the fire.

“I didn’t know you were a baker!” I exclaimed with fascination as I watched Glenda’s steady hand saw through the crisp crust.

“I don’t get to do it as often as I’d like to nowadays,” Glenda shared as she passed the piping bread around the room. “I used to own a bakeshop with my girl and granddaughter, but things aren’t as easy as they used to be, and we had to shut it down. They moved to the edge of the forest not long afterward, but I still see ‘em occasionally. About once a week or so I’ll bake a little something for everyone here so we have some good bread.” I thought back to the stale bread I had for breakfast and suddenly, I felt a much stronger appreciation for the meal.

“That’s very kind of you Glenda. Thank you for the meal.” I smiled and for a moment, I thought I had seen her smile in return.

“Yeah, well don’t go crying over it,” she retorted in her usual gruff tone. “Just eat it before it gets cold. It’s only fresh once, you know.” I ate my bread and drank the thin soup that Delilah had prepared. We all ate quietly, but there was a comforting peace in the air.

After dinner, Glenda and Daniela left for home while the rest of us winded down for the night. As I settled into my laundry bed that evening, I found myself wrapping my fingers around the cool metal whistle hanging from my neck. Quickly, the metal grew warm from my touch and the feeling reminded me of the warmth of Peter’s laugh at lunch today. He had been so kind and considerate of my situation. Perhaps he had been even more considerate than what propriety would have required for a captain of the royal army. I clutched the whistle close to my chest, now fully familiar with every bump and ridge along its surface. It made me feel safe, enough so that I believed I may actually survive these next twelve days and rescue my mother from King Garrett. I closed my eyes and pictured my mother’s furious blue eyes from the last time I saw her. Regret filled my heart as I recalled her anger at my actions. She was my mother, after all. Why had I done such an awful thing to her?

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I whispered nearly silently into my bedding. Something inside me just needed to voice the words out loud in order to feel they were real. The feeling of remorse was new, and it overwhelmed me. It shook me as I realized I didn’t want the last memory of my mother to be one where I felt she resented me. When I safely returned home and saved my kingdom, I would make her proud of me. She would never remember all the reasons she had to ignore me as a child.

I just had to find a way to remove King Garrett so he doesn’t kill us first...

Well, I never said it would be easy.

I tossed and turned in my bed for a while, once again unable to settle my mind. Finally, my agitated body gave up on sleep entirely, and I stood to pace the floors for a bit. The workspace was a little eerie at night, but the dusty shutters let in enough moonlight to provide adequate visibility. It was a good thing too, otherwise I probably would have tripped a dozen times on all the puddles and clutter that littered the dingy floors.

After narrowly avoiding a collision with a dangerously crowded shelf, an idea sparked into my mind. I looked across the room to my brown blanket that I left by my bedding, and then back to the fire that was burning low where our meals had been cooked. These women had done so much for a

complete stranger. I thought it was about time I did something in return. There wasn't much I knew how to do in return, but not everything took specific skills.

A strange, unfamiliar feeling coursed through my heart as an idea formulated in my mind. I had never felt such a desire to do something for anyone other than myself— it was entirely out of character for me— but for some reason, my feet moved toward the cleaning supplies.

As silently as I could, I rolled up my sleeves, grabbed a mop, and spent the rest of the night doing something that was completely foreign to me.

I got to work.

chapter eight

Thirteen days remaining.

I don't remember exactly what time I finally went to bed, but it was late enough that the crickets had stopped chirping and the birds had started singing their morning song. The light from the polished open shutters shone unforgivably bright onto my unwillingly eyelids, yet it wasn't the sun that woke me.

"My word! What happened here?!" Hazel's outburst startled me awake for the second day in a row. I yawned loudly and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. "Is everyone else seeing this? Did somebody break-in overnight?"

I finally managed to clear the daze from my vision and looked around to see all five of my sleeping companions marvel at the freshly cleaned workspace. The whole space looked brand new, even more so now that the sun was out. The shutters were dusted and shined as if they had been freshly painted, the floors were mopped and polished, and the shelves had been cleaned and organized. All the floor drains that had been clogged with soap scum were now sparkling like new and drained water with ease. There were still massive piles of dirty laundry by the front of the mill, but they had been organized into even amounts for washing loads. Shocked, the girls wandered around and I feared that my efforts were misplaced. What if I had messed up some sort of organization system?

"What do you think Mr. Dwarfer is going to do when he sees this?" Delilah gasped as she inspected the drains.

Fearing I had made some horrible mistake, I slowly stood up from my blankets to approach the group and confess my actions. As I approached, all five looked to me and widened their eyes at my rugged appearance. My dress was covered in a fine layer of dust, and stains from spilled cleaning polish dotted my skirt. If my attire wasn't a big enough clue to my actions, I was certain the shadows under my eyes spoke my truth. "I'm sorry, everyone... I just thought—"

"You're sorry!?" Hazel cut me off, still appearing stunned. "Are you kidding us? This is amazing, Annie! Did you really do all of this yourself?" She ran and grabbed me by the shoulders, slightly shaking them with excitement.

"Yes?" I answered wearily but felt relieved that they weren't upset. "You all have done so much for me. I just thought if I cleaned up a little bit, things would be easier on everyone. I hope it suits everyone's needs." I looked up to them hopefully and found myself suddenly encased in a group hug.

"Oh, Annie, you are far too sweet!" Sylvia's squeaked through the embrace. "You didn't have to go through such trouble!"

"Were you up all night?!" Susan's chirped from somewhere behind me. "You must have been as quiet as a mouse! I slept right through it all." The girls giggled at my sneakiness as they held me close, and I couldn't help but embrace them back.

"I just wanted to say thank you to everyone." I stepped back as they released me from the squeeze. "I hope you can accept it." Their smiles spoke volumes as they giddily expressed their gratitude over the smallest details. I had never felt as fulfilled as I did as I watched them admire my work and express their joy.

"Honestly, Annie, this is beautiful!" Hazel gawked as she looked through the rows of alphabetized shelves. "Did you train at a palace? I have never seen such attention to detail before!" I raised an eyebrow in confusion. Was this not the standard for cleaning in regular businesses? I knew

the castle was exceptionally well-kept, but I couldn't see the purpose in cutting corners when everything looked better when given full attention.

"I guess I am merely used to higher standards." I shrugged. "Of cleaning that is," I quickly added, clarifying my statement.

"Well, Mr. Dwarfer is going to love this! He is always bugging us to tidy up around here, but we've never had the time." Hazel twirled across the clean floor carelessly. "I can't wait to see his face when he comes by today!" Upon her final twirl the back door swung open and an equally stunned Glenda and Daniela approached us.

"It's about time someone cleaned up around here. Ya know, us old folk would have helped if you asked." Glenda stated with a befuddled look on her face.

"We'll explain it over breakfast! I'm starving!" Hazel grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the fire, leaving the two older ladies to their bewilderment.

Throughout our breakfast of porridge and tea, the girls spilled all the news about my clean-up job. It was strange getting attention for something that, for once, I didn't seek admiration for. Something inside me just wanted to remain quiet and allow everyone to simply enjoy the fruits of my labor. It was an entirely new feeling, considering I had been so accustomed to praise throughout my life, but today I just felt as if I didn't need it.

Who was I and what had I done with Arabella? Maybe Annie was starting to take over my mind...

Despite the hot meal, my body still wasn't quite feeling prepared to get back to work. I might have already overworked myself, and we still had an entire day to go. I rubbed my eyes and yawned with a stretch, hoping to spring some life into my tired limbs. My feet ached and my eyes didn't want to focus clearly. No wonder none of the other girls had ever tried to catch up on cleaning; it was exhausting. I stumbled over to my work station, and Susan and Bethanne nearly had to catch me as I tripped over a stray towel.

"Sorry, everyone," I mumbled through another yawn. "I don't think I have quite woken up yet." The other ladies passed concerned looks around to each other.

"It's pick-up day," Glenda muttered from amongst the crowd. "Why don't ya go sit and wait by the office doors and tend to the desk if the entry bell rings. We won't be missing an extra set of hands today, and I don't think anyone here is gonna deny you an easy day." She looked at the other girls as if waiting to be challenged, but nobody said a word.

"Really?" I questioned hopefully. "Are you certain that would be alright?"

"Of course! You've earned it after what you pulled off last night." Hazel gestured energetically around the sparkling room. "Let us pick up some of the slack now." She winked at me, and I smiled appreciatively in return.

With everyone's blessing, I proceeded to find a cushy spot of unlaundered military uniforms that was near the main doorway. It was close enough that I could hear the door from the entry space open and close whenever clients came by, but also far enough away from the other girls work that I could doze between passing off orders. After a few hours of dozing I was beginning to feel much more like myself again. There had only been three pick-ups so far— two were done by housekeepers of distant estates and one was a small load for the local banker. I had just begun to consider making myself useful again when I heard the bell chime through the wall. I stood from my seat and did my best to straighten the wrinkles in my dress before waltzing through the door to greet the next client.

When I opened the door, I was surprised to see an exquisitely dressed young girl. She was petite, maybe fifteen years old. Her vivid blue dress was crafted out of some of the finest satin in the

kingdom—and was fine enough that even I would have been pleased to wear it a week ago. I looked up at the girl's face and was greeted with a pair of bright blue eyes, a dash of freckles, and shiny gold curls that would have shamed even my mother's blonde strands. After giving the girl a thorough inspection, I quickly slid behind the counter to remind myself that I was here to do a job, not gawk at a young girl's outfit.

"Good morning miss. Do you have a pick-up for today?" I flashed a friendly smile like I had seen Mr. Dwarfer do the day he met me.

"Yes, thank you." She smiled sweetly. "It should be under the name Aurelia Lockly." Her diction was clear and perfect—an obvious indication she was a well-bred young lady.

"Thank you Miss, Lockly. That will be just a momen— Hold on a second." I stopped myself and looked the girl up and down again. "So, you're Aurelia! Oh it is such a pleasure to meet you. The other ladies speak of you often, and I have desperately wanted to pair the name with a face." I placed my hand to my lips for moment, realizing I may have outspoken. "Please forgive my bluntness, I am simply pleased to meet you." I offered a dainty curtsy to display respect. *Annie shouldn't be so informal with a respectable lady.*

"Well, I must say I am honored to hear that they speak so highly of me." Aurelia laughed sweetly and offered me a return curtsy. "It is an honor to meet you as well, miss...?" She paused playfully, allowing me to fill in the blank.

"Annie. I'm new to the mill." I made careful effort not to include my unfortunate choice of last name. "I apologize for taking up your time. Please allow me to fetch your belongings." I began to make my way out from around the counter but her welcoming laughter halted me.

"Oh no need to rush, Annie dear." Her laughter died as she gestured for me to remain in my spot. "I am sure the other girls have told you by now that I visit here to get away. Where would the fun be if I simply took my washing and left?" She grabbed one of the waiting room chairs and slid it up to the desk, seating herself comfortably. "So, tell me, Annie, how does a pretty young woman like yourself end up working in a laundry mill?" She leaned back in her chair, relaxing as much as one could in a wooden seat.

"Well..." I paused, but then realized she was only making brief conversation and probably wouldn't pry too severely if I told her my story. "I left home... a bit of a family drama situation. I came here looking to hide out for a bit and was lucky enough to find a job." I shrugged as if the explanation was truly that simple, and she nodded in commiseration.

"I completely understand family drama." She rolled her eyes in a very obscene manner for a lady, but I simply giggled at her relaxed demeanor. She was very easy to talk to for someone I had just met. "If I wasn't so trapped out here, I would have left my family long before now. All they ever care about is getting in with the court and sucking up to the royals. They are so desperate for their attention that they never even spend time with their own daughter." She huffed into her seat, blowing a loose golden curl away from her eyes.

"I understand that," I sympathized, imagining my mother. "My mother never made time for me, either. She might as well be a stranger at this point, but her even after all of that, I still aim to please." I was surprised by the amount of honesty in my statement. It was something I hadn't truly admitted to myself, but it rang true in my heart.

"Exactly!" Aurelia exclaimed, bolting upright in her chair. "Why must we care so much about what our parents think when they don't give a blooming thought about us!" She smacked her fist on the table, clearly fired up, yet her tone still expressed a light heartedness toward her frustration.

"Parents can be so ridiculous." She sank back into her chair with a sigh and crossed her arms,

trying to look serious, but she only managed to burst out into a giggle. "I fear we have too much in common, Annie. I shall have to keep talking to you since you have failed to bore me."

I laughed at her chide. "My apologies Lady Lockly." I offered a dramatic bow. "Please allow me to entertain you with gossip about the latest politics within the royal court instead."

"Oh, please, any torture, but that!" She cried dramatically as she raised her arms in defense. "Also, Lady Lockly is my mother, I would rather become a scullery maid than be compared to her. Call me Aurelia, and I hope you don't mind that I have been calling you Annie."

I crossed my arms and placed a hand on my chin in consideration. "Hmm, I don't believe I am offended enough to snub you until the end of winter." She gawked amusedly as I continued, "so, I suppose I shall permit it." We laughed as if we had been friends for years. She was far younger than me, but her sense of humor was directly on par with mine. We laughed over rules and puffed-up parents, and had a genuinely enjoyable time. After a while, she finally concluded that she had to be on her way, and I was sad to see her go. It was nice being able to chat with someone who had so much in common with me. She collected her laundry and bid me a friendly farewell. As I watched her leave, I noticed a separate figure pass her and make their way to the door. No sooner than the door had shut, it swung open again and in waltzed Mr. Dwarfer.

"Good morning, Annie, it's good to see looking so well-adjusted." He gave me a brief smile then continued, "I am glad you are here, actually. We just got a new shipment of laundry soap in today, and I will need you and the others to unload it. You can just throw out the old stuff, this one is said to be better quality." He waved at me to follow as he started toward the side door that led to the workshop.

"Girls! I need you to— My heavens!" His jaw dropped as he finally noticed the condition of the room. The girls paused their work, flocking around to where we stood, beaming proudly at his expression. "It's about time you girls cleaned this place up. It looks remarkable! I must say, I am impressed you have all really outdone yourselves!" He gave a pleased grin as Hazel stepped forward.

"Actually Mr. Dwarfer it was—"

"A lot of work, but worth every bit of it!" I cut Hazel off before she could give me the credit. I had done this for them, not for myself. "We are just pleased that you are happy with the work." I smiled brightly, ignoring the other girls' puzzled looks.

"Well, that I am. Well done, ladies." He gave another approving smile. "I think you have all earned yourselves a small bonus this week. Now, why don't you all help me unload this new soap so you can prove to me that you deserve it?" He chuckled and the other girls rushed into action. As they passed me, they each gave me a silent look of appreciation, and even Glenda gave me a friendly pat on the back as we walked toward the truck. My heart beamed with satisfaction. It was the most incredible feeling, one I wanted to continue for as long as possible.

It didn't take long to unload all the soap with everyone's help. The jugs of solution were heavy, but soon enough the shelves were stocked, and all the old soaps had been tossed. I met up with Sylvia to help her dump out the wash basins and fill them with the new cleaner, and we were very pleased with the freshly cleaned drain. The water flowed perfectly and didn't leave a single unwanted puddle on the floor. We started popping the cork tops off the new soap jugs and the building instantly filled with the scent of crisp apples.

"Do you smell apples?" I asked Sylvia as we measured cups of the compound into the basins.

She leaned her nose towards the cup and gave a light sniff. "It's this new soap," she concluded, pouring the liquid into the hot water. "A lot of cleaners we use have been scented by fruit

or flower extracts to cover any lingering scents on old laundry. I quite like the smell of this one actually.” She spoke cheerfully as she finished her task and popped the cork back onto the jug.

The scent was refreshing, but also a bit overpowering with all the jugs being opened at once. I excused myself to get some fresh air and stepped outside through the side exit. Once outside, I took a deep breath to clear my head. The winter air was still cold, but much more bearable than it had been the night I ran through the woods. I decided to take a little walk, following the slender creek toward the woods. The girls had already essentially given me the day off, so I didn’t think they would mind if I spent a little time on my own. As I walked, my boots crunched over the scattered twigs that littered the ground. I move carefully, watching my step so I wouldn’t slip on any wet spots from melting snow. The mill was just barely out of my view when I felt my body grow cold from exposure. Having decided it was about time I headed back, I turned to follow the creek, but froze at the sound of a distant stick snapping.

No... It couldn't be. I held every muscle, not willing to risk so much as a breath. What was I thinking coming all the way out here without telling anyone? I slowly began to hunch down toward the ground, trying to make myself as small as possible. I reached toward the whistle and gripped it firmly, preparing to use it if needed. For a moment, everything was silent. I let out my held breath, feeling safe enough to rise from the ground. The tension in my muscles began to lessen as I stood to my feet. Maybe it was just a squirrel? I took a deep breath in the attempt to calm my nerves. I looked around the path for any signs of disturbance other than my own before feeling safe enough to proceed back the way I came. Gathering my courage I took the first step toward home.

Then the hand clasped around my mouth.

chapter nine

I screamed as loud as I could into the hand that held my mouth. An arm clamped around my waist and pulled me back into the brush as I desperately clawed at their hand, but my attacker didn't even budge at my flails. Panic seared through me as my memory flashed back to the dagger glinting in the moonlight. My thrashes gained more force from the terror, but their grip held firm. The assailant spoke quietly, stunning my movement.

"Arabella, please... It's Peter," he whispered urgently into my ear.

I ceased my efforts at the familiar voice as I turned my eyes to see none other than the green-eyed captain I had met yesterday. My fear melted and was quickly replaced with irritation as he slowly released his hold.

"Peter!" I hissed back in a whisper. "What are you doing grabbing me in the middle of the woods?! You frightened me half to death." I pulled away from his arms in a huff.

"Shh." He held a finger to his lips. A deathly serious expression crossed his face, numbing my anger. "We are not alone." My body tensed again. The twig I heard breaking earlier came from in front of me, but Peter came up from behind. So, if it wasn't Peter I had heard, then what was the noise?

He must have seen the alarm in my eyes because he placed his hand back on my arm reassuringly, and this time I didn't push him away. My hand fell on top of his wrist, and I clutched his sleeve tightly. *He wasn't going to leave me, right? What would I do if he dashed into the woods and left me alone?* He gave my arm a soothing pat and slowly began to rise from the ground.

"No wait!" My whisper came out desperate. "Please, don't leave me. What if it's the assassin?" I looked up to him pleadingly, still clutching his sleeve.

"I won't leave you, princess." His hushed voice filled me with a calm I was in dire need of. "But I do need to investigate whoever is out there. Stay right here and don't make a sound. I promise I won't go farther than ten paces. You should still be able to see me through the brush." He cast me a reassuring look, easing me to release the hold on his wrist.

"Alright," I whimpered. "Just please... be careful." He nodded softly, then proceeded to step in the direction of the earlier noise.

True enough, he only took ten wide paces before stopping in his tracks. I anxiously watched through some loosely dense shrubs as he scanned the woods, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. After a few tense moments of Peter surveying the surrounding trees, he cautiously turned back to my hiding spot. I rose tentatively from my cover as he approached, his eyes darting back and forth among the trees. He was only a mere three paces away when without warning, an arrow whizzed by my eyes missing by only an inch.

"Get down!" Peter shouted as he unsheathed his sword and raced in front of where I stood.

On his command, I ducked to the ground, covering my head in defense. The blood drained from my face as I recognized how close to death I had just been. I was too terrified to look up, but I could hear the clashing of blades a few feet in front of me. My legs trembled beneath me as the sounds grew quicker and more targeted. Suddenly, the sound of clanging metal ceased, and a horrible silence echoed through the forest. I fought the urge to look up, fearing that my hiding place was the only thing dragging out my dwindling life span. Without thinking, I latched onto a sizable rock that rested beneath me, desperately seeking any form of defense.

With my new weapon in hand, I mustered enough courage to look up from my spot ever so

slightly. My eyes widened in horror as I saw Peter locked in a stalemate with a man dressed head to toe in black. The man stood behind Peter, his sword pressing close to Peter's neck, blocked only by Peter's sword. In turn, the captain held a small knife inches from the attacker's stomach, but the man had a firm grip on Peter's wrist, preventing him from following through with the attack. The two men stood locked in frozen combat, each using their full strength to fend off the other's attack. If either let up for even a moment, they would forfeit their life.

My hands clasped over my mouth, shaking from the sight before me. The slightest movements of struggle from both men made my heart skip a beat as I witnessed the sickly moments before death. *What do I do?* Hot tears flooded down my cheeks as I held back a cry of anguish. Peter's strength was beginning to subside, and the attacker's blade was inching closer to his throat. My voice choked on my scream and in a moment of despair, I sprinted toward the man in black. At the sound of my movement, both men looked up at my oncoming presence. The man wore a mask over his nose and a black hood, but I instantly recognized his steel-blue eyes. My movement startled both men enough that they loosened their grip and broke away from each other's hold.

"Princess, stop! Run away, now!" Peter shouted frantically as he tried to run back toward me, but the other man was faster. He pushed past Peter and raced toward me, his sword at the ready.

Adrenaline pumped through my body as I tightened my grip on the large stone. I stopped in my tracks only feet away from the oncoming killer and leaned back on my right foot. With every ounce of strength I could muster, I reeled my arm back and threw the rock at the man, aiming for his forehead. Simultaneously, I stumbled over the uneven ground, falling hard on my wrist. The limb throbbed in pain as I looked up from the dirt to see the rock make contact. My aim wasn't anything to be proud of, because even from close range I only managed to hit him square in the chest— although it still sounded like it hurt. A loud thump resounded at the impact and the man let out an audible groan of pain. He hunched over and held a hand to his chest where the rock had struck him. He then rose awkwardly to his feet with anger burning in his eyes.

Fortunately, the injury had delayed his pursuit long enough for Peter to get past him and stand at guard in front of my crumpled form. The man furrowed his brows at the captain and took a few slow steps back, still gripping his weapon.

"Very resourceful, princess." The man's words sounded exasperated as he tried to hide the pain. I felt a small sliver of satisfaction seeing him recoil from my attack. "A captain is an excellent shield indeed, but unfortunately, not a very subtle one." His blue eyes glinted wickedly as he exchanged a deathly stare with Peter. "Looks like I know where to find you for our next little game. Have fun hiding, princess... I will see you soon." And with those last eerie words, he darted back into the brush, leaving the two of us alone in the chilling air.

Peter helped me from the ground, then quickly pulled us both deeper into the woods in an opposing direction, fleeing from the place of conflict. When we finally stopped at a safe distance, my adrenaline fled my body, leaving behind only a rush of emotions.

I fell to my knees and sobbed uncontrollably. It wasn't very dignified for a princess to be seen bawling her eyes out in the middle of the woods, but right now, I simply did not care. I was too overwhelmed, and my wrist hurt too badly for any consideration of my own dignity. As I allowed my emotions to spill over, I felt a gentle hand grace my shoulder. I looked up through my tears and saw Peter had hunched down onto the ground with me. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a white linen handkerchief with the military insignia embroidered on the corner. I accepted it graciously and wiped my eyes with my good hand. It smelled just like him— of pine and sunshine with a hint of musk. *Wait a moment... When had I noticed his scent? Working in the mill must have attuned my*

sense of smell; surely, that was it.

"Thank you," I murmured into the handkerchief. "Please forgive my unseemly manner. I am afraid that my emotions have been building up for far too long for me to control them properly." I wiped away the last of my tears and offered the handkerchief back to him. Instead of taking it, he offered me a hand to raise from the ground. The movement was so fluid, it was as if I had weighed nothing at all to him.

"Do not fret, my princess," he said, his words gentle and caring. "There is no shame in feeling fear. I am deeply sorry that I was not able to protect you well enough to prevent such terror." His hand didn't release from mine at first, and I found myself relishing in the warmth of it. The sun was blocked out by the trees and the air had begun to grow chilly.

"There is nothing to apologize for," I stuttered slightly as my teeth began to chatter. "If you had not been watching me, surely, I would be dead by now." My arms wrapped around my body instinctively, still remaining sensitive of my aching wrist. A cool breeze blew, shaking a few leaves from the trees, sending a shiver down my spine. Seeing my obvious cold, the captain removed his uniform jacket and gently draped it over my shoulders, leaving him in only a white button-up. I fought off the warmth of a blush at the action.

"May I see your injury?" He gestured toward the hand I was favoring. I stretched out the tender limb and he took into his hands. I winced at the touch as he ever-so-delicately turned my hand over so it faced upward.

"It isn't broken, is it?" I could feel my face contract from the sting of his careful movements. He was looking at it so inquisitively, almost as if he was studying the joint itself.

"No, I believe you have only sprained it." He turned my hand back over with a slow motion that thankfully didn't cause further pain.

Once my hand was facing downward again, he placed two of his fingertips overtop the most sensitive spot of the injury. I grimaced at the discomfort, but suddenly, a soothing sensation spread through my wrist, nullifying the pain. Peter's eyes maintained strong concentration, so much so that their natural green color began to brighten and grow more vibrant. It took me a moment to recognize that he was using his magic to heal the sprain. I directed my eyes to his silver streak that peeked out from under his cap. True to myth, it was sparkling with energy, much like a glistening gem. It was truly beautiful and before I realized it, the pain in my wrist had completely subsided. I watched curiously as his eyes shifted to their normal hue and the patch of silver reduced to a more natural sheen. He removed his hands from mine and looked up at my enraptured face with a smile.

"How does it feel now, Your Highness?" He looked to me expectantly, and I realized I had been staring at his eyes long enough for him to notice. I felt a flush of embarrassment as I slowly rolled my wrist around to test its sensations, and I found not even an ounce of pain stirred from the movement.

"It feels perfect!" I exclaimed in amazement. "That is remarkable. I never realized magic could be so useful." My memory recalled the enchanter who had tried to impress me by making gemstones illuminate in the dark. Peter's magic was on a whole different level than anything I had ever witnessed.

"It's nothing much," Peter claimed modestly. "My magic is actually rather weak for a caster, but my gift for healing makes it useful. My true talent is curing illnesses. If your injury had been anything worse than a sprain, I wouldn't have been able to fully mend it." His humility astonished me. That was considered weak magic? Healing any injury, even a minor one, was nothing short of miraculous, and certainly more wondrous than a glowing rock.

“That is incredible,” I gushed like a true fanatic. “Thank you for showing me your gifts, and also for using them to heal me. I am truly in your debt.” I lowered my head in gratitude.

“I believe I am just as much in your debt, Your Highness.” An expression of gratitude crossed his face. “You came to my rescue during combat. If you had not provided such an excellent distraction, I fear I would have succumbed to the enemy’s sword. Better yet, you landed a blow on him. I didn’t realize the princess of Isalla had such a good arm.” He chuckled softly, earning a smile from my lips.

“Well, to be honest, I was aiming for his head.” I laughed, shrugging off the mistake. “Given my skill set, I was fortunate to have hit him at all.” We laughed together at the surprising humor.

“In all seriousness, Peter,” I sobered and looked directly into his deep green eyes, “thank you. If I make it back to the palace in one piece, I promise you shall be greatly rewarded.” I bowed my head in respect, but he bowed even lower, causing me to stand up confused.

“I shall receive no such reward other than the honor of protecting my kingdom and my princess.” He rose slowly with his hand still placed honorably over his heart. “Unfortunately, it would seem that our enemy has connected that I am aware of your identity. Furthermore, he believes this to be a weakness in your hiding.”

I shifted uncomfortably at the thought. It was true, though; if he couldn’t find me, he could easily follow Peter if he got too close to the mill.

“Does that mean you won’t be able to come near the mill anymore?” I looked to him worriedly as I imagined another attack commencing without him nearby.

“For the most part, yes,” he said sadly and my heart sank at his words. “But now that I know whom we are up against, I can send troops to hunt for him. I can command a manhunt for a foreign threat without the need to bring your name into the mix. We should be able to apprehend him within a few days, so you’ll be safe.” He offered me a reassuring smile as we commenced our walk back into town.

“Do you really think you’ll be able to find him?” I couldn’t hide the hopefulness in my voice. “If he was out of the way, then perhaps I could find a way back into the castle without risking being slain by King Garrett.” I grinned optimistically at the idea. I was getting anxious to be rid of the dreadful king after all he’d put me through.

“At the very least, we will be able to keep you safe with him gone.” He looked amused by my change of mood. “Unfortunately, I cannot say it would be wise to return to the castle with King Garrett still residing there.” His handsome features expressed apprehensive worry. “We already know there was at least one infiltration in the castle with your dear assassin. Therefore, if there are anymore residing in Isalla, what would prevent King Garrett from simply killing you before you ever reach the queen?”

I considered his words as we stepped over a fallen log. He was right, of course. Isalla wouldn’t be safe unless King Garrett was gone.

“I agree. We need to create a public display of removal that draws the attention of the Ashbourne kingdom. With them being our strongest ally bordering Drancos, I doubt King Garrett would wish to invoke their involvement.” My mind began to spin into action, finally feeling cleared enough to form a plan. “The only dilemma is providing a legal and just reason to request that he leaves on such short notice. Anything less than a formal decree would go unnoticed by Ashbourne. Without the official documentation, the king could easily murder the queen and I without any forewarning that he was unwelcome. Then, he could simply twist any tale he desires about how we were slain by a rogue assassin. Essentially, in order to ensure the support of our allies, we will need

to make a show of things.”

“That is an excellent plan princess.” Peter gave me a look of admiration as he nodded in approval. My heart fluttered at his compliment for some reason. “How do you propose we find a legal reason for removal?” He looked genuinely interested in my answer, and I felt a tad ashamed for not having any further thoughts on the matter.

“I don’t know,” I admitted flatly, ducking under a low branch. “The kingdom of Drancos has always been good to Isalla until now. They are one of our most reliable trade partners, so that makes it difficult to withdraw our hospitality.” I looked to the ground as we walked, feeling a wave of defeat wash over me.

“There will be a way.” He offered a friendly smile, stepping slightly in front of the path to face me. I stopped in my tracks as he blocked my route. “Any princess who can survive two confrontations with an assassin, hide in plain sight from a tyrannical king, and rescue a captain of the guard from certain death should be more than capable of saving her whole kingdom on a casual afternoon.” He dramatically enacted all my finest moments with a cheesy grin on his face.

“Oh please.” I pushed past him with a laugh. “Don’t you know that rescuing the kingdom is the first lesson taught in princess school? Honestly, the knights are merely there for decoration at this point.” My tease earned a follow-up laugh as he stepped up onto a fallen log.

“I expected nothing less of you, my princess.” He gave a flourished bow from atop the log as if it were his stage. “My only desire is to someday amount to a fraction of your glory.” I let loose another laugh. His boyish sense of humor was somehow funnier considering his rank. How did a captain manage to be so lighthearted, yet still focus with severity when a threat arrived?

“My dear captain, only a few can amount to being as great as I.” I climbed onto the log with him, upstaging his moment. He hopped off onto the forest floor with a leafy crunch and stepped back to permit me of my moment. “One must train for years to establish the grace of a royal, but the skills of a mill maid warrior are so exclusive, I fear no one shall ever approach my talents.” I gave a slight flaunting twirl, but quickly lost my footing on the uneven wood. My boot slipped out from under me, and I braced for impact with the cold ground; however, my fall was cut short by a pair of warm arms.

“Careful, now, Your Highness...” Peter’s arms wrapped around me. His left arm had caught under the bend of my knees and his right braced my back. He held me in a perfect bridal carry with his eyes nearly level with mine. *Those perfect green eyes...*

“Arabella,” I spoke softly, but with a confidence that held his comforting gaze.

“Pardon, Your Highness?” He scrunched his handsome features into confusion.

“Call me Arabella,” I whispered and his eyes widened softly in surprise. “You have only referred to me as ‘princess’ or ‘your highness,’ but I would like you to call me Arabella from now on.”

“Are you certain?” His eyes gazed deep into mine. He still held me close, and I could sense the slightest increase of his heartbeat upon the question.

“Quite certain.” A smile graced my lips in approval. “I have missed the sound of my own name lately, and I feel I can trust it to you for the time being. Will you accept it?” This time my eyes gazed into his to search for affirmation.

“Absolutely, Arabella.” His face lit up when he said the name, and I couldn’t help but beam a smile at the sound of his voice. He set me down gently, waiting to ensure that my feet were firmly on the ground before removing his arm from my back. I instantly missed the warmth his touch had provided. He never broke eye contact as he released his grip, and we both stood in the forest in comfortable silence for a few moments. The peaceful quiet broke after what felt like an eternity when

Peter extended his arm to me.

“Shall we continue?” His voice sounded tender and gentle, but his eyes looked like they longed to say something more as I accepted his arm and followed his lead.

“Thank you, Peter.” My voice came out quiet, but he didn’t have any trouble hearing me. We were both too wrapped up in each other’s presence to notice anything else. Arm in arm, we made our way back to the edge of the forest where the creek met the mill. Not wanting to risk being seen by any of the mill workers, we decided to part ways.

“Will this be the last time I see you for a while?” I already knew the answer, but I asked it anyway. Something inside me yearned for him to say no. I pushed the feeling down as far as it would go, but the saddened look on his face sent it back to the surface.

“I am afraid so.” His words were brave, but I could sense a small hint of disappointment.

Did he want to see me again? I caught the question as it flooded into my brain and shoved it aside to deal with later. What was I thinking? I had far more important things to think about than a handsome captain, although he was *very* handsome. I snapped my attention back into the conversation.

“Oh, I nearly forgot.” I pulled his uniform jacket off my shoulders and handed it back to him. “You’ll be needing this.” He took the jacket from my hands, his fingers lingering over mine for a brief moment.

“I suppose I will. But if I take it, then what will you have to remember me by?” He gave a small smirk and I smiled back.

“Well I do have this.” I pulled on the chain around my neck, displaying the metal whistle he had gifted me. “This way I can call on you if I need to see your charming face again. Just don’t keep too far of a distance, okay?” The words sounded more like a plea than I had meant, but he smiled warmly in reply.

“Do not worry, I would not dare stray far enough to risk your safety.” His gentle expression cast a feeling of security over me. How had it only been two days that I had known this man? I felt as if he had been in my life for years. and I could trust him with every aspect of my safekeeping.

“Thank you, Peter,” I hastily turned to leave, not wanting him to see the dismay on my face at our parting. I made it only a few steps forward before Peter’s voice rang behind me. His words making my heart flutter in a way I didn’t realize was possible.

“Goodbye, Arabella.”

chapter ten

An entire week passed without incident, and only six more days remained for me to survive through. My time at the mill blurred together as routines began to settle. Out of fear of the recent attack, I never left the mill. Hazel took Delilah with her on deliveries upon my reasoning that I was more efficient on the washboards. No one really argued the matter since it was common knowledge that Delilah had always been a tad sloppy with her work—not to mention, Delilah was happy to accept a change of pace. With the issue of remaining hidden resolved, there wasn't much left to fret about. Other than the matter of removing King Garrett after I was free to return safely to the castle, and the other matter of Peter...

I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind since our unexpected encounter in the woods. Images of his gentle eyes flashed through my mind each night, and I could almost feel the warmth of his embrace as if he was holding me in the middle of the forest again. It was completely ridiculous, of course. I had only known the man for two days at the time, yet here I was, day dreaming about him. The more I tried to convince myself that I was being foolish, the more I heard his voice ringing in my head.

“Goodbye, Arabella.”

The internal voice made my heart skip a beat and simultaneously sink at the reminder of his goodbye. I missed having someone to share my true name with. Perhaps that was the reason I longed for his company so much. Surely, his kind eyes, handsome face, and comforting presence had nothing to do with it. I groaned to myself as I recognized my own obvious attraction. There was no room for fancying a charming captain at a time like this.

Ten days had passed since my fourteen-day countdown toward freedom. Only four more days, then I would be safe from one villain, but I still hadn't made any progress on how to remove King Garret from Isalla.

The usual morning fire glowed warmly as the girls and I gathered around for our morning tea and bread. The routine had become familiar and comforting over the time I had spent here, and the girls felt more like family than fellow workers. I took it upon myself to pour everyone's tea this morning but paused when I noticed I was one cup short. I looked up from the group with a puzzled expression, counting the faces. Let's see, there was Hazel, Glenda, Daniela, Susan, Bethanne, Delilah, and... Wait.

“Where is Sylvia?” I inquired with concern as Bethanne and Susan shared a glance.

“She's still in bed.” Susan pointed towards the laundry piles and sure enough, I could see a bundled figure still curled up amongst the fabric. “She hasn't been feeling well lately, and last night she spiked a fever.” She sounded worried as she spoke. Sylvia always seemed to be sniffing from one thing or another, but she had never been bad enough that she couldn't work.

“I think there's a flu going around,” Hazel chirped with less enthusiasm than usual. “Peter told me that a few of his soldiers had been coming down with something similar lately, but none have had fevers.” Her eyes lowered with concern. My heart leapt without permission at the captain's name, but I quickly reeled the emotion back.

“That sounds terrible.” I felt my face fall as my concern for Sylvia hit. “Perhaps I could go into town and purchase some medicine? We just got paid the other day, so I wouldn't mind picking up a few things from the local apothecary.” I recalled a small brick building I had seen on my first trip through the town.

“Ya don’t have to go spending yer money on any of us,” Glenda huffed as she munched on a piece of bread.

“No really, I want to.” I put the tea kettle down and walked toward my locker. “If I leave now, I should be back in time to help with the majority of the washing. We wouldn’t want the rest of us to get sick anyway, so it’s in everyone’s best interest if Sylvia gets better as soon as possible.” I tied my cloak around my neck and smiled reassuringly. The girls all shared an understanding look before Daniela spoke up.

“Very well, Annie. Just be sure to get back safely.” She smiled her sweet, motherly smile toward me, and I grinned back.

“Oh and keep an eye out for any more gossip from the capital!” Bethanne shouted as I made my way toward the back door. “Last night, when I was at the market, I heard Queen Minerva and King Garrett just announced their engagement!” I stopped in my tracks. My blood froze in my veins at Bethanne’s words.

No...

“Yeah, I heard that ,too,” Glenda muttered under her breath. “These blasted royals have no idea how to rule anymore. They can’t find the dang princess, so they marry each other instead. Sounds like a desperate act of alliance to me.” The other girls began to jabber away at the exciting news, but my feet held stiff.

How could this be happening so soon? They had only been together for a week, and now they were getting married? How was I going to find a way to dissolve the engagement without sparking an opportunity for war? If Isalla broke off the engagement without proper cause, then Drancos’ allies would get involved in the conquering as well. Isalla would be gone.

I knew I had been standing for too long, so I willed my feet forward until I made it out the door. As soon as my feet hit the cobblestone, I nearly ran to the apothecary, my body needing to exert the frustrations I was feeling. When I finally arrived at the rustic brick shop, my chest was heaving from the exertion. I took a few moments to catch my breath before stepping through the door.

The room smelled of herbs and was spotless. Shelves of healing elixirs and medicinal plants lined the walls that led to a front desk at the back of the room. Behind the counter stood a rosy-cheeked woman with curly red hair and a plain white tunic dress. She offered me a friendly wave, but then turned her attention to another customer who was already at her desk. I looked at the back of the man standing a few paces ahead of me and instantly recognized his tall physique.

“Peter?” I called, my voice filled with hope as the man turned and smiled widely at me..

“Annie? What brings you here today?” His dashing green eyes were alight with joy, but I also sensed concern in his voice. His elation seemed hindered by an underlined worry. Was he worried I was sick?

“Sylvia is unwell,” I clarified. His face relaxed at the news then grew concerned again. “I came to see if there were any medications that would aide in her recovery.”

“I see.” He nodded in understanding as he approached the counter with me following. “I fear I am here for a similar reason. Mass amounts of my soldiers have been falling ill from a mysterious cause. They haven’t struck any fevers, but they haven’t been able to recover, either. I have been using my gifts on the infected men, but they only remain well for a short period of time. Usually, I am quite adept at dealing with illnesses, but this one perplexes me. My magic never seems to be enough to fully resolve it.” I could see the worry on his face as he spoke.

What an odd plague this was.

“Sylvia has been feeling unwell for some time now, but last night she spiked a fever,” I

explained solemnly as his expression grew wide.

“Is that so?” He turned back toward the woman who had been patiently observing our conversation. “Would you be so kind as to add an additional elixir to my order?” He slid a small pouch of coins across the counter and the lady accepted it graciously.

“Of course, sir.” She smiled sweetly at Peter. “Just give me a few minutes and I’ll get them bottled for you.” Then she disappeared through a back doorway.

“Peter, you didn’t have to do that. I can order my own medicine.” I held up my pouch of coins that were hidden within my cloak.

“I am certain you can, but Sylvia is a dear friend of mine as well.” His face reflected soft-heartedness. “This is simply a gift to her. Also, I wouldn’t want you or the other ladies to catch this illness so it is simply a gift to you all.”

I nodded gratefully in understanding. “Thank you, I will be sure to tell them you wish everyone well.” I thanked him kindly, feeling touched by his concern. “While you are here, I must ask you...” A bubble of fear rose inside me as I prepared to ask the question I was dreading. “Is it true...? Are King Garrett and Queen Minerva engaged?” I could feel my eyes well up as I murmured the words.

“Yes, it is true.” He placed a hand on my arm compassionately, and I bit my lip to hold in a quiver. “The announcement was made yesterday, and they are making the arrangements now. I’m sorry Arabella,” he whispered my name quietly so only I would hear it. His voice made it sound so beautiful when he spoke it, and the sound comforted me. I had a sudden longing to be wrapped up in his arms again as we had been in the forest. Shoving the thought aside, I wiped my eyes.

“What am I going to do now?” Despair filled my voice. Removing the king from Isalla seemed hopeless now. A royal engagement was a serious occasion and bound both parties to a series of regulations regarding the terms of the alliance. If Isalla was to back out now, then Drancos would have every right to declare a siege and their allies would likely stand with them. We were officially backed into a corner, and only Peter and I were aware of it. I lowered my head in defeat, but Peter pressed a finger under my chin and raised it so I was looking up into his eyes.

“Don’t give up hope yet.” His handsome face was determined as he held my gaze. “The laws are intricate. There must be a work around that we haven’t considered yet.” He offered me a reassuring smile and I felt my spirits lift. He was right; I had spent too much time hiding and protecting myself, and now it was time I started fighting for my kingdom.

The back door creaked open, and the cheery shopkeeper stepped out with two paper sacks in her arms. She set them both on the table and handed the larger one to Peter and a smaller, palm-sized one to me.

“There you are. That should help reduce any symptoms and boost their immune systems.” She pointed toward the package in my hand. “Just have the infected drink half of it before bed and the other half in the morning. It may not be a perfect cure, but it should at least get them back on their feet. Now, is there anything else you folks need today?” She smiled sweetly as she pointed toward a few other ointments and healing teas.

“That should be all for today. Thank you kindly for your services.” Peter flashed his signature grin and tipped his hat before waving good bye. He held the door for me on the way out and we both stood on the cobble road for a moment before deciding what to do next.

“I suppose I should get this to Sylvia...” I held up the tiny package. The last thing I wanted to do was say goodbye to Peter so soon, but it probably wasn’t the safest idea for us to be out in the open together.

“Yes, of course. I am sure the other ladies are expecting you as well.” While he sounded

understanding, I caught a hint of disappointment in his tone. "I should return to the outpost as well. Hopefully these elixirs will help cure whatever mysterious illness has been ailing my men and Sylvia." Despite his words of leaving, he remained standing for another few silent moments before either of us made any further movements.

"Peter?" I said timidly as if he might turn to leave at any second.

"Yes, Arabella?" He sounded eager, yet discreet as he spoke my name. I felt the familiar flutter of joy as I heard it.

"Can we arrange a meeting together?" I stared up at him, intently watching for his reaction. His face didn't display any visible changes, but his eyes lit up enthusiastically. "I feel as though I can strategize better when I can bounce ideas off of someone," I quickly clarified. His enthusiasm sent a spur of nervousness through me I wasn't prepared for.

"I would be more than happy to assist you." He looked honestly delighted at the request. "This may be short notice, but tonight is my evening off. Would you be available to meet after supper?" He shifted his weight while patiently waiting for my response.

"Yes, that should work perfectly." I could feel myself grow excited. A whole evening just to talk with Peter... To discuss political actions, of course. "Where should I meet you? I don't think the outpost would be a safe choice yet. I also won't be able to take Dottie, so I shall have to walk." I thought back to the long winding path that had first brought me to encampment.

"What if we meet at the fallen log in the woods?" he answered quickly as if he had already thought this part through. "Where we hid during last week's... events." He cautiously glazed over the assassination attempt as he glanced around at distant townsfolk. "Do you remember how to get there?" My thoughts flashed back to the moment when Peter held me in his arms; I felt my cheeks grow hot and quickly nodded as if too cool them off.

"Yes, I can find it." I kept my head low to avoid him seeing my flushed face. Why did this always happen around him? "I will head out just after supper. I can tell the girls I'm going for a walk." I risked looking back up to see a smile on his face.

"Wonderful," he said cheerfully. "I look forward to seeing you then." With that he waved a simply goodbye and started back down the cobblestone street. After he was out of sight, I realized I had been wearing a giddy expression.

I shook my head, trying to shake out any unwanted thoughts. I needed to focus. Tonight was about forming a plan for Isalla and nothing else. With this reaffirmation in mind, I began making my way down the road with pointed strides. As I walked, I heard the familiar sound of carriage wheels clacking over the stone. I crossed onto the side of the street to avoid getting in the way, but surprisingly, the vehicle began to slow until it matched my pace. I was beginning to grow concerned when, without warning, a friendly face poked their head out of the moving window.

"Annie dear, is that you!" Aurelia radiated elation as she hung halfway out of the carriage to gawk at me. I stopped my pace and turned to face the gleeful young girl as her coach pulled to a stop. "Oh, it is you! How have you been? I haven't been able to make it over to the mill in quite some time now, so I hope you are all doing well!" Aurelia opened the door and stepped down onto the bumpy road to greet me with an affectionate hug.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Aurelia. I have been well, thank you." I smiled to her as we parted from the embrace. It was so good to see her again. "I have certainly been longing for another one of your visits. Your company was so well appreciated last time." She gripped my hands energetically as I expressed my fondness.

"Oh, that is so lovely to hear!" She dropped my hands and clasped her own together in

excitement. "How have the others been doing? Are you heading there now? I could give you a ride if you would like. Oh, Annie, it has been so boring this last week with my parents around, and I would love to come say hello!" Her words shot out like they were racing each other, causing my head to whirl from her questions.

"I actually was just heading back," I said slowly making sure I answered at least one of her questions. "And the other girls have been doing mostly well, but unfortunately, Sylvia has fallen ill. I was just on my way to bring her some medicine." I held up the paper package with a much more solemn expression.

"How dreadful, I hope she is alright." Her cheerful expression switched to sorrow at the news. "Is there anything I can do to help? I probably shouldn't visit if there is a chance of contracting this illness, but maybe there are some supplies you could use that would aid in her comfort?" She looked to me with pleading eyes, clearly earnest about wanting to help.

"That is very kind of you to offer, Aurelia," I expressed sweetly. "I am not sure what exact items she is in need of, but perhaps we could think of something small to bring her." I thought through gifts that would provide ample comfort.

"Why must it be small?" Aurelia gave me a confused look. "Money is no object, and Sylvia is a friend of mine, just like the rest of you. I will gladly provide her with whatever she may need. Just name it." She beamed proudly under the idea of bestowing comforts onto her friends. I couldn't help but be impressed by her generosity. Most noble ladies would receive a regular allowance in order to upkeep the most recent styles among the public. Seeing a lady choose to spend her funds on others was nearly unheard of within the capital. My thoughts broke as she continued. "Have you had lunch yet? I know it is rather early, but would you like to join me at our estate? My parents are spending the afternoon meeting with a lumber business partner, so we would have the whole house to ourselves." She grabbed my hands again and squeezed them eagerly. This poor girl was desperate for someone to share her time with. I smiled brightly at the idea, but hesitated for a moment.

"I would love to but..." I felt her hands loosen their grip. "I need to get this elixir back to Sylvia. The sooner she takes it, the sooner she will hopefully get well." I shifted my hand in her grasp to once again show the wrapped bundle.

Aurelia looked to me with understanding, then widened her eyes with a smile. "That's not a problem!" She ran around the front of her carriage. "Roger dear, would you step down for a moment?" she called toward her footman who had been sitting on the exterior bench with the driver.

"Yes, my lady?" he asked as he stepped down to greet his mistress.

"Would you care to do me a favor?" Aurelia turned to me and plucked the elixir straight out of my hand before I could even protest. "Please deliver this to Sylvia Putnam at the Woodlands Laundry. Any of the ladies there should be able to bring it to her. It is only about a ten-minute walk from here, and I shall send the carriage back around to pick you up after we have returned home. Can you do this for me?" She stretched out the elixir to him with a sweet smile.

"Of course, my lady." The footman took the package with a bow. "It would be my pleasure."

"Wonderful! Thank you, Roger. We shall see you soon." She spun back to face me with an unapologetic grin on her face. "Well then? Shall we?"

I couldn't help but laugh at her spunky boldness. She held out her arm to me as an escort would.

"We shall." I laughed wholehearted as I took her arm and followed her into the carriage.

chapter eleven

Nestled within its own corner of the woods, the Lockly estate was beautiful and oozed with rustic charm. The beautiful stone walls were interlaced with creeping green ivy, and the gardens were just the right amount of overgrown. As we stepped inside, it was like walking through time. The exterior of the house may have looked rustic, but the interior contained only the most modern décor. Everywhere I looked, there were imported rugs, hand-carved furniture, and polished crystal. None of the furniture had even the slightest appearance of use and for a moment, I thought we were standing inside a window display at the capital. As we adjourned to the parlor, I couldn't help but feel reminiscent of my own lavish home. It had been so long since I had even imagined being back at the castle, and I hardly even felt I missed it anymore. As expected, Aurelia filled the vast space with endless chatter. We talked about her family, local gossip, and even about each girl at the mill. She seemed to be endlessly amused about the goings-on of each of our lives in comparison to hers.

"Oh, Annie, your job sounds so lively," She fawned in between bites of jelly smothered biscuits. "It must be so amusing to have so many fellow workers to chat with. I would love to have such fond company every day." She took another bite of biscuit, then dabbed her crumb-coated lip with a linen napkin.

"They certainly help pass the time." I reflected before biting into my own biscuit. It had been so long since I had eaten something this sweet. The flakey biscuit practically melted in my mouth as the sweet jam danced across my taste buds. As incredible as it was, I still found myself thinking about Glenda's freshly baked bread.

"So, what do you usually talk about when the days get long?" Aurelia asked, leaning in with interest.

"Usually gossip." I furrowed my brow as I struggled to think of a more specific answer. "Oh! Recently, the girls have been spending their time fantasizing about other people's romantic prospects." I giggled recalling all their dreamy scenarios. "They love to create these drawn-out love stories on even the most mundane gossip." Aurelia's jaw dropped open with amusement.

"Oh, that sounds hilariously entertaining!" She let out a small laugh then leaned back into her plush arm chair with an inquisitive look on her face. "I wonder whom all they fantasize about. Let me guess!" She sat back up with a jolt, earning another giggle from me. "I bet the royal family is a hot topic!" My smile froze stiffly. "Between the princess's disappearance and the engagement between the Drancos' king and Queen Minerva, I am sure there is plenty to send the imagination into a frenzy." She began to laugh but slowed when she noticed my lack of reaction. "Annie? Is everything alright?"

Realizing my absence of words, I sat up with a start. "Oh, sorry... I was only spacing out for a moment." I tried to sound convincing, but she looked at me with concern. That was when I started to consider something. Aurelia was well-educated and of noble birth. Surely, she would have studied political affairs at some point. Maybe she would have some insight on how to disband a royal engagement?

"Aurelia? Could you enlighten me...?" I asked as mildly as I could. She raised an eyebrow at me but looked intrigued.

"Is something on your mind?" Her expression was one of genuine fascination. Her big blue eyes dug into me with the longing to understand what was troubling me.

"It's nothing serious. I just was curious on your thoughts," I lied cautiously. This was anything but unserious. "The king of Drancos and Queen Minerva are engaged, correct?" She nodded quietly,

still looking perplexed. “Well, say for instance, the people of Isalla wanted to reject King Garrett. Do you think there would be a plausible way to dissolve the engagement without risking political backlash?” I held my breath. This was risky. Aurelia was kind and trustworthy, but there was no reason for a lowly commoner like Annie to ask such an in-depth question. I dug my nails into the soft arms of the chair in an attempt to channel my nerves anywhere other than my facial expression. I watched tensely as she pondered my question with a thoughtful look. The seconds that passed felt like hours before she finally opened her mouth to speak.

“Well, naturally there would have to be a way to annul an impending marriage.” She tapped her chin as she thought. My nails sank deeper into the plush furniture and I began to fear I would tear it. “Say, for instance, an engagement was formed, but then one of the parties involved tried to display power over the other. If they used the advantage of the impending alliance to threaten the opposing kingdom, then they would essentially be breaking the alliance before it was even formed.” She lowered her hand from her chin and looked at me for a response..

I ran her words through my mind for a moment before replying. “I think I understand your perspective.” I released my grip on the chair and rested my cramping fingers against my mouth as I thought. “So, what you’re saying is that a marriage alliance cannot be formed if the terms are not upheld during the engagement.”

“Essentially yes,” she replied, clearly engaged in the discussion. “An engagement is a binding contract on its own. I don’t see why the marriage should be upheld if the contract is broken before solidified with vows. However, there would have to be an inciting incident that allows for such a claim to be made in the first place.” She gazed back at me and took a long sip of her tea. This must have been fascinating for her, but hopefully, not enough for her to question my curiosity.

“That would make sense.” I considered the events of the past week for such an incident. An idea popped into my mind, and I felt the biggest smile span my face. “So, it just needs proof!” I nearly leapt out of my seat, startling poor Aurelia. “If evidence is provided that an act of aggression occurred during the span of the engagement, then the marriage could be dissolved! Not only that, but the aggressor would be put into a position of defense given their breach of the agreement. The only requirement would be presenting evidence before the court!” I wanted to sing with joy, but Aurelia’s befuddled expression brought me back to reality. “Pardon my excitement. I am very fascinated by politics.” Shrugging, I sank back into my chair, but she continued to stare with her mouth agape.

“So it would seem...” She brushed a blonde curl away from her face as she searched my eyes for any clues on my absurdity. “Are you sure everything is alright, Annie?” Her blue eyes narrowed in suspicion. Her gaze pierced through me with an unspoken desire to know more than what I was verbalizing.

“Everything is just perfect,” I said airily. A weight had been lifted off my shoulders and not even Aurelia’s suspicion was going to threaten my joy. “To be completely honest with you, my friend, I have had a lot on my mind lately. Speaking with you has given me a much-needed release, and I am ever-so grateful.” Her expression softened at my gratitude. I had risked a lot speaking with her on this topic, yet I had felt entirely comfortable talking with her about my true dilemma.

“Annie dear, you know you can tell me anything.” Her voice was gentle and sweet. She truly had become a friend to me, just like the girls at the mill. “I get the feeling that there is something you can’t tell me.” My heart skipped a beat as a small sense of panic spread through me. “But that’s alright!” Her smile shined like gold, and I wanted to hug her right then and there. “Everyone has a few secrets, but I hope you know that you can trust me to keep yours, whether you tell them to me or not.” She winked and I couldn’t help but let out a laugh of relief.

“Thank you, Aurelia. That means more than you know,” She stood from her chair and pulled me into a needed hug. After a moment of embrace, she broke away, still holding me at arm’s length.

“After all, you keep my secrets too.” She grinned, back to her perky self. “My parents would probably disown me if they knew about my visits to the mill. They think it is positively vulgar for a young lady to form friendships with anyone below her own status.” She rolled her eyes in annoyance as she turned back to her previous seat. I returned to my chair as she sighed.

“Well, the girls at the mill all adore you,” I said brightly.

Aurelia smiled vividly from the flattery, then jumped from a thought. “How could I have forgotten? We need to create a list of supplies to send to the mill!” She rushed out of her chair and scrambled to find a quill and paper, knocking over various items as she fumbled. Once she procured the necessary materials, she sat back in her chair, bracing the paper against an adjacent side table. “Let’s see here... I shall send some food packs, of course, some healing herbs, and a new tin of eastern tea...” She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling as she tried to conjure more ideas. “What do you think Sylvia would like?” She looked to me expectantly, and I spent a moment to consider some options.

“Perhaps a pillow would be nice?” I thought back to Sylvia’s sickly form scrunched up in the clothing mountains. A proper head rest might be an appreciated comfort.

“A pillow?” Aurelia looked up from her paper, and cocked her head to one side in confusion. “Does she not already have one?”

“No actually,” I replied with a shrug. “None of us who live at the mill do. Mr. Dwarfer is kind enough to let us sleep in the laundry piles, but he isn’t able to provide us with typical bedding.” I watched as Aurelia’s expression faded into horror.

“The laundry!?” she shouted with disgust. “You mean to tell me that the pretentiously wealthy Wilson Dwarfer makes his workers sleep on *other people’s clothes*?!” Clearly, she was enraged, and while I knew her rage was not directed at me, I still shrank back subconsciously, not wanting to prod her further.

“I was unaware that he was so well off.” I attempted to divert the conversation in a different direction before she busted a blood vessel. “He had always seemed fairly modest when I spoke with him.” I thought back to his polished appearance and copper monocle. He was well-kept, but never showed any obvious signs of wealth.

“Oh, he is rich alright.” She huffed another curl away from her eyes. “He used to make a modest living, but recently, he has been dressing like he is the emperor of this town. He just bought a new estate a few days ago and has been begging my parents to come over with their friends. If he suddenly has so much money then why is he mistreating the women who do all the dirty work?” She stomped her foot and I felt some of her anger spread into me.

He was wealthy? I suppose he could use his money however he pleased, but how could he go about flaunting it when he knew perfectly well the living conditions his workers endured? The sweet smiling faces of my fellow workers flooded my mind as rage built up inside me. They worked so hard, and they deserved better.

“How many beds do you need?” Aurelia grabbed my attention with a fire burning in her blue eyes. “Do you need blankets? Sheets? Never mind, I shall send everything.” She scribbled furiously on her paper, not bothering to look up.

“You don’t have to send all that. We have lived like this for as long as we have been there.” I stretched my hand out as if I could stop her, but she only wrote faster.

“Look what has happened to Sylvia.” She glanced up for a moment, and I recoiled at her fury. “It

is no wonder she fell ill living in such hazardous conditions. I am just grateful the rest of you haven't grown ill as well." She finished writing and called for the nearest servant. "Please purchase these items and have them delivered to the Woodlands Laundry Mill with haste. If the owner has any questions about the delivery, tell him he may address me directly regarding the issue." She handed the paper off and the servant left as quickly as he had arrived. I couldn't help but be impressed by the presence this young girl empowered. She was around the same age as Hazel, so she was probably a full four years younger than me. I found myself mentally aspiring to possess the same bravery she did. Her position required her to look down upon others, yet here she was, enraged over the mistreatment of common employees.

A sensation of guilt flooded me as I reflected over my previous treatment of our staff. Had I been any different than Mr. Dwarfer? So many times I had put my loyal servants through trial and difficulties with my foolish pranks and teasing. They had always been so kind and humble toward me, yet I looked down on them as if they were nothing more than toys for my amusement. My mind flashed to the faces of the mill workers in comparison to the castle servants who roamed the halls of my previous home. They were no different from each other, yet I treasured the girls and had mistreated the servants. It was utterly deplorable of me. *Has it really taken me this long to recognize how self-centered I am?* If I ever made it back to the castle, I swear things will be different. My servants deserved the same respect that Aurelia and I gave the mill maids, and now I knew it.

"Thank you," I finally said. "Your kindness is inspiring, Aurelia. It makes me wish I had been more like you when I was younger." I smiled softly, and she returned it having cooled down from her rage.

"I am nobody special," she admitted modestly. "Kindness exists within everyone. You just have to be brave enough to accept the consequences that may come with. For instance, my parents are sure to be short with me after spending my whole allowance on something other than jewelry. Too bad I don't care what they think." She chuckled at the notion. I laughed alongside her, then peered out the window to examine the time of day.

"This has been the most pleasant visit, but I'm afraid I shall need to return soon." I sighed heavily. As much as I desired to stay and waste the hours away, I truly needed to get back to the mill. If I was going to sneak out after supper, I should at least do my fair share of work beforehand.

Aurelia dropped her gaze to floor without even trying to hide her disappointment. "Very well then, I understand." She rose to her feet, brushing her rumpled skirt. "I shall fetch the carriage so you may ride back, but you must promise you will visit again soon." She held out her hand to help me out of the soft chair, and I smiled cheerfully.

"I promise!" We continued giggling down the halls until she led me to the front gates where the black coach was awaiting.

"Don't forget to tell the others I say hello!" She waved to me regretfully as I stepped into the coach. "The supplies should arrive by tomorrow morning at the soonest. Please write me if you or anyone else requires anything more," she shouted through a sudden wind that rocked the coach a little unsteadily.

I popped my head out of the window after the footman shut the door behind me. "Thank you, Aurelia! I am certain your gifts will be more than enough for us all." I waved a friendly goodbye to her, and she proceeded to wave back until we had rounded the bend out of sight. I sat back into my seat with a joyful grin plastered to my face. On top of a lovely visit, I had discovered the solution to my most looming problem. Aurelia had been correct. All I needed to do to save Isalla was to prove that King Garrett had already broken the alliance of a marriage. He had been the perfect guest in the

eyes of the kingdom thus far, but his background work had treachery written all over it. I only needed to compile the evidence, and for that, I already had a plan.

When we arrived back at the mill, I gave my thanks to the driver and made my way inside. Seven familiar faces turned to me with skepticism as I walked through the doors.

“Now where’ve you been all day?” Glenda shot me a stern look. I guessed Aurelia’s footman hadn’t explained my lunch invitation upon delivering the medicine.

“I apologize for staying out so long,” I said innocently, though the bothered stares continued. “Lady Aurelia invited me to her estate for lunch. She wanted me to tell everyone that she says ‘Hello’ and wishes you all well.” I directed my gaze back toward Sylvia, who was sitting up to watch the interaction, but she still looked rather pale.

“That explains a lot!” Hazel’s energetic voice carried across the room as she remained bent over her washboard. “Lady Aurelia loves to gossip and can hold a conversation even longer than Captain Peter.” She giggled, and I was suddenly reminded of Peter’s generosity early.

“Aurelia and I ran into each other after I picked up the medication for Sylvia.” The brunette girl looked up weakly from her place of rest, and I gave her a soft smile. “Also, I wasn’t the one who purchased the medication. Peter was at the apothecary and purchased it for me before I could stop him. He said to consider it a gift.” I looked towards Sylvia who wore her own grateful smile. The other girls wore matching expressions of awe and surprise as I shared the news.

Daniela smiled with a touched expression. “How very kind of him. He truly seems to care about us meager mill maids.” She snuck me a knowing look that I pretended not to notice.

“Oh, and there is one other thing...” I paused for a moment, trying to find the best words to explain today’s events. “Aurelia sort of found out about our living accommodations and was rather disgruntled about it.” I fidgeted my fingers in an unladylike manner as the girls eyed me with ever-growing suspicion. “So in response, she may have ordered sleeping cots, bedding, and other home necessities that will arrive sometime tomorrow morning.” I clasped my hands together and held them tightly, awaiting their response. They all stared at me blankly at first. I knew the girls would refuse any outward help if offered due to their pride in their work, so I was anxious to see how this news would play out.

“Are you joking?” Bethanne spoke up first, but she nearly stuttered in bewilderment.

I took a deep breath “No, I am quite serious.” Many mouths dropped open as I confirmed my statement. “She absolutely insisted and would not take no for an answer. All she asked is that we make time to visit with her when we can.” I let out an exasperated breath as the shocked faces remained unchanged.

“I don’t know what to say...” Susan’s mouth hung just as wide as she gaped in awe. “I can’t believe it. A real bed!” Suddenly, her look of awestruck changed to one of elation. Her change in pace threw me off guard for a moment, until suddenly the women were celebrating in unison. Hazel ran up to me and enveloped me in a tight hug that nearly knocked me off my feet.

“This is wonderful, Annie!” She pulled back, allowing me to draw in a breath. “I would have never imagined Lady Aurelia would be so generous! I don’t think I have slept on a real cot since I was living with my family.” She gave me another tight squeeze then hurried off to exclaim with the others.

I stood alone for the next moment, trying to soak in their excitement. It was incredible how much joy something as simple as a bed could bring. I thought back to my first night on my own when I lay in the snow, wishing desperately to be home. That night seemed like a lifetime ago compared to all the memories I had created since. A smile spread across my face as I relished in the joy my friends

were experiencing. Yes, friends. These women were my friends, just like Aurelia and Peter were as well. Before the excitement could get too out of hand, Glenda whistled loudly, effectively silencing the entire room.

“Alright, alright,” she hushed everyone within an instant. “This is great news, and we can all celebrate *after* we finish today’s workload. Everyone got it?” Her tone was serious but held its own unique expression of cheer. The girls all returned to their posts, and I picked up an unused washboard and settled in front of a basin.

I worked with a constant smile on my face. My mind whirled to life as I scrubbed to the tempo of my thoughts. Tonight I would get to see Peter, and I had the perfect plan to share with him. I continued to beam my excitement as we moved to folding, then cleaned up for dinner. I could hardly eat with the anticipation building up inside me, but Glenda made fresh bread, so I managed. As the hour grew near, I excused myself for an evening stroll, nearly skipping out the door. Once outside, I pushed a few dark strands of hair out my eyes, then sprinted into the setting sun.

Fear not Isalla, you will be safe again soon.

chapter twelve

My feet carried me through the woods with an energy I hadn't possessed in weeks. The air had grown frosty, stinging my cheeks as I swiftly continued. Thin, wet snow flurries trickled down from the sky, making the ground slippery under my boots. I slowed my pace to a brisk stride, recalling how often I had fallen on my first solo trip in the woods. Delicate snowflakes began to collect on my lashes, blurring my vision, but I never broke my stride. Before long, I had reached the clearing where the fallen log lay blanketed with a thin layer of white. On the other side of the log stood a tall, broad-shouldered man bundled in a thick black wool coat. He turned to me as soon as my footsteps were audible and instantly smiled upon meeting my eyes. I ran toward him, neglecting the safety of walking, and promptly slid across a wet patch. Instead of entirely falling, I regained my footing, but stumbled aimlessly until Peter leapt across the log and gathered me in his arms. I couldn't help but laugh at my clumsiness as he held a tight grip on shoulders.

"Less than two weeks away from the castle, and I have already lost every ounce of grace I ever possessed." I steadied myself, still laughing. "Thank you for coming to my rescue, but I believe I can stand now." Peter released his grip on me, but remained at a close distance.

He smiled back at my amusement then crossed his arms. "Oh my, I never would have expected such blundering coordination from a lady of noble birth, never mind a princess." He laughed at his tease, and I gave him a playful slap on the arm with an awestruck expression.

"I beg your pardon?" I tried to sound offended but couldn't stifle a giggle. "The ground is slick, and I was far too excited to share my news with you to walk at a slower pace. Although, now I am uncertain if I should share my discoveries with such discourteous company." I turned my back dramatically, flaunting the information as if it were peacock feathers.

He laughed at my theatrics, then raced in front of my line of sight. "A thousand apologies, Your Highness." He bowed with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "May I be so brash as to request that you share this astonishing news which has you buzzing?" He returned to his full height, then looked me square in the eye. He still bore a playful expression, but there was a serious inquiry behind it.

"I have drafted a plan that will allow the queen to call off the engagement, remove King Garrett from Isalla, and even provide grounds for our allies to stand alongside us." I proudly watched as his eyes grew wide with relief, then anticipation.

"That is indeed wonderful news." He glowed with delight, and I noticed his green eyes light up with the joy. His eyes were always so expressive. Looking into them felt like I could see right into his heart and soul. "So, what is the plan? How may I be of assistance?"

"First off, I cannot take all the credit." I brushed some of the soggy snow off the log to take a seat. "I had lunch with Lady Aurelia Lockly today, and she had some excellent insight on the matter." Peter took a seat beside me and furrowed his brow in concern.

"Oh, don't worry!" I continued, understanding his unease. "I was vague. She is still unaware of my true identity." I watched his shoulders relax as he motioned for me to continue. "She reminded me that an engagement bears the same laws of alliance as marriage. Therefore, if one of the involved parties invokes harm upon the other, they are henceforth breaking the alliance, correct?" Peter's face scrunched up in deep thought as he followed my words, but he soon nodded in understanding.

"I believe I follow you." He tapped his chin quizzically. "So, what you're saying is that if King Garrett posed a treasonous act toward his future queen's kingdom, she would be permitted to break

off the engagement under the law that the alliance was not maintained.”

“Precisely!” I replied brightly. “Now tell me, Peter, what is more treasonous than sending an assassin after your future step-daughter?” I cocked my head and leaned back.

“You want to convict him of your attempted murder?” His tone turned sobering and fully dropped his previous liveliness. “You’re correct to assume that it would be a heavy enough charge, but how do you intend to prove it was him? The attacker has scarcely been seen and has only spoken to you and me. I fear that is not enough evidence to sway in your favor.” He looked at me apologetically, though my grin did not fade with his solemn expression.

“Yes, I have already considered that fact.” I offered him a sly smirk, earning a confused stir out of him. I then dropped my quirky expression into one of grave severity. This was the last complication I had to encounter. “I shall need an important witness to prove my case, and that is where I shall need your help, captain.” I held his gaze intensely.

Please don’t say no. This was the only part where I feared he would stop me. If he denied his help, I would be back at the starting line. I desperately hoped he would hear me out.

“Any aid you need is yours, princess.” He matched my intense gaze and spoke softly. Then he did something shocking. He reached out and took my hand. It was a simple movement, but it caused a reaction from every nerve in my body. His well-worn hand gently brushed across the top of mine, causing me to lose my thoughts for a moment. I looked up from the hold and saw he was looking only at me. “I wish to be of service in any way I can. Just say the word, Arabella.”

There he went saying my name again. My cheeks felt hot, and I felt my heart flutter without restraint. How could one man be so captivating? I wanted to tear my eyes from him in embarrassment of my attraction, but something pulled me closer. No matter how much I denied it, there was a part of me that wanted to continue like this forever. I let out a deep breath remembering what I had intended to say in the first place. Focusing on my kingdom should be the priority right now, not my interest in Peter.

“The assassin,” I said plainly, trying to keep my unruly emotions in check. “He shall be my witness. I intend to set a trap for him with your help and bring him to the court to testify against the king.” I anxiously watched as Peter’s soft expression morphed into one of horror.

“Trap the assassin? Have you gone mad?” He stood from his seat to pace in front of me. My heart sank as his hand broke away from mine. This was what I feared. “That man has sadistically been prowling for you for over a week. He has already made an attempt on your life and is unlikely to give up after the fourteen days have passed. If we intentionally brought him into close proximity with you, I am certain it would only make his job easier.” His pacing left deep tread marks in the snow. I sat uncomfortably as he continued to let off steam. “I understand this is a matter of life and death, but your life is just as important as any others.”

I stood, matching his intensity. “That is where you are wrong.” I spoke strongly with the power of the ruler I was born to be. “My life means nothing in the grand scheme of saving my kingdom.” His eyes still burned with intensity, but I held my ground firmly. “If I cannot put my life on the line to protect my citizens, then what poor excuse for a princess am I? My father never hesitated to lead his troops into battle when the Ashbourne kingdom tried to siege. His bravery built Isalla into the proud kingdom it is today. I will not let Isalla fall in his absence merely because I was too much of a coward to do what was needed.” My chest heaved from my outburst. Ferocity raged inside of me as I unloaded the frustrations that had been building up inside me for years. I may have been content to sit and look pretty in the past, but not anymore. Peter’s intensity had dwindled into one of respect and sorrow. I remained where I stood as he reached out and took my hand again. My pent up emotions

rushed out of me at the touch.

“Arabella,” he sounded frightened, and I looked up, confused by his reaction. “I have no doubt you will be the bravest queen Isalla has ever had the honor of revering.” He lifted my hand toward his chest and held it level to his heart. “But unlike you, I am a coward. I am terrified of what will happen if I fail to protect you before you can grace your throne.” He raised my hand to his lips and placed a delicate kiss upon the top, and my pulse quickened—my heart was threatening to escape at how quickly it raced. Was he saying what I thought he was? “I would not be able to live with myself if that monster laid a hand on you. You are far too important to this kingdom and to me.” He squeezed my hand gently.. Did Peter have feelings for me? Or even yet, did I have feelings for him? I focused on his expressive green eyes looking for answers he was much too anxious to ask out loud.

“Peter I—“My words failed me as I got lost in those alluring eyes. I took a deep breath and summoned my courage. “I need to do this.” My voice shook. It was so hard to ask this of him now. His expression held so much weight behind it, and I felt terrible for adding more. But this wasn’t for me, it was for my people. “Please, I can’t do this without you.”

He slowly released my hand while lowering it from his chest. His weighted gaze faded into a stone hard visage that bore no emotion at all. He now looked like a soldier, the type who had just been assigned a mission that held the weight of the world. A rush of guilt flooded over me for stirring such a response out of him.

“As you wish my, princess.” His eyes were empty now, as if his soul no longer remained within his body. “I understand your concerns and shall proceed with your requested plans, however...” His voice dropped intensely with a strong serious inflection, “if he comes too close to threatening your life, I swear, I will end his.” I felt an odd shiver run down my spine. It was a welcome feeling to be protected, but his intensity rattled me. Within an instant he was back to his flat military expression as if his warning was merely a comment on the weather.

“Thank you, Peter,” I said cautiously, uncertain of how to proceed. I knew he would oppose the idea, but his feelings had surprised me. I was aching to know more about how he felt toward me, but I feared I had already ruined the opportunity. Did he resent me for my request? I began to wonder if my insistence on the plan had come off as a rejection toward him. My mind tried to piece together a dignified reply that would preserve his attachments long enough for this craziness to settle.

“Peter, I...” I paused as he gradually walked back over to the log and sat. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that this is what must be done but... Please, just know that when this is all over and I am back where I belong, I don’t want to forget about you.” My nerves started to grip at me. He remained stark, merely watching me with that empty expression. “You are amazing, Peter, and I could not have made it this far without you. You made me feel safe when nothing else could, and I am forever grateful to you. I hope you can forgive me for putting you up to such a strenuous task.” I looked to him, desperately searching for a reaction, yet his face remained the same. I wanted to scream at him or maybe just cry. What had I done?

“Thank you for the kind words, Your Highness.” His tone remained flat, and I felt a sting at the use of my title as I longed for him to say my name again. “Since you have devised this plan, may I ask how you intend to put it into practice? We shall need to formalize all of the elements before it is implemented.” He sounded so much like a captain now, and I wanted to slap myself for separating the man I knew.

The man I cared for.

“Yes, of course,” I said remorsefully as my previous excitement lay shattered around me. “I was intending to use myself as bait.” His façade broke for a moment, displaying a short moment of panic,

but it was quickly recovered by his cool calm. I was surprisingly relieved to see he could still emote even for that moment.

“What do you suggest?” He looked at me inquisitively and I tried to pull together my own diplomatic presence. If he was going to switch only to business, then there was no purpose for me to hold out for anything more.

“I will need you to spread some rumors around the outpost,” I said in my clearest, diplomatic tone. I still had a kingdom to protect, so I simply needed to focus on that. “Pass around the information that an important witness will be in need of transportation to the castle. Announce that they will be escorted around one o’ clock tomorrow with a minimal amount of men to lessen attention. My hope is that our target has been sticking close to your men after learning you and I were associated. With any luck, we can lure him out of hiding under the presumption that I will be returning to the capital and we can set a trap for him.”

“That may work... but it needs a few adjustments.” He stood from his snowy seat and began to pace through the snow again. He really liked to move when he was thinking. “If I was to actually be moving you, I would spread rumors about a one o’clock departure, then in reality I would move you at twelve. That way, if the assassin had overheard the plans, he would be too late when he came to hunt. Unfortunately, this assailant is likely to expect that trick, so we would need to prepare the trap much earlier.” I nodded as he continued on. For what felt like hours, we continued buffering out the fine details of the agenda until we had a reasonable plan of attack concocted. By the time we had finalized all the particulars, it was long past dark and the cold air had grown almost unbearable. Despite Peter’s blanked out persona, he still offered to walk me back to the mill before returning to the outpost. When we arrived at the side door, he gave me a stoic farewell and headed back down the trail without another word.

I quietly stepped into the mill and cautiously made my way to my sleeping spot. The other girls were already asleep, and I didn’t need Hazel waking to ask whom I had been with. The warmth of the fire sent comforting tingles across my skin as I lingered in front of it for a moment. I added a couple extra logs to increase the glow, then mindlessly watched as the flames danced in front of my eyes. After feeling thoroughly warmed, I tucked into my clothing pile and tried not to think too hard about the events of the day, especially, Peter.

Just thinking of his name made my heart ache. He had been storing feelings for me all along, but for how long? When did this start? Had it been since we first met? Or had he admired me as a princess long before then? I hushed my mind to stop bustling, but it refused to listen. Watching gentle and caring Peter turn into an impassive captain had been one of the hardest things I had ever seen. If it wasn’t so crucial to my kingdom’s protection, I would cancel the plan and take back every command I ever gave him. I would do anything to see the joy in his captivating jade eyes. The night persisted on with nearly no sleep as I tossed and turned in my bedding but couldn’t find any rest.

As it grew closer to morning, I noticed it was more than just my thoughts that had been keeping me up. My body ached with fever from head to toe. A splitting pain settled into my head as the sun peered through the windows, and my breathing labored slightly. I looked around the room disoriented from the headache and saw Hazel rushed over toward me with a cup of something.

“Annie, stay in bed!” she scolded me from across the room. The volume sent a twinge of ache through my head, so I complied and rested it back down. Hazel hurried up beside me and handed me a cup of hot tea, then placed a cool cloth on my head. “You and Daniela caught Sylvia’s illness.” She wiped beads of sweat away from my brow as she spoke. “Daniela is staying home for the day, and Sylvia still hasn’t recovered, so we sent a message to Mr. Dwarfer who should be arriving soon.

With this many girls sick, we can hardly keep our work quotas, so he'll tell us what to do next. Until then, just rest and work on getting better." She offered me a sweet smile, but I could tell she was genuinely worried. I sat up slightly so I could sip the warm tea and instantly relished in the hot liquid.

"Thank you, Hazel." My voice rasped slightly at first use, so I cleared my throat. A sudden panic rushed through my mind as I recalled the plans I had made with Peter. "Hazel, what time is it?" I tried to sound relaxed, but my distress was quickly increasing.

"Hmm? Oh, it's a little past eight, I believe." I let out a silent sigh of relief at this news. "But don't you worry about that. We won't have you make up any hours for being sick or anything. Just focus on getting better." She assisted me in resting my cup securely on the floor, then left me alone to rest. I rolled over trying to calm myself, but I couldn't.

Peter was preparing to kidnap an assassin with me in four hours, and I was sick in bed.

chapter thirteen

The next two hours passed painfully slow. Partially from my head, but mainly from the distress I was in. At around ten in the morning, a delivery wagon pulled up to the mill to drop off all the supplies Aurelia had purchased for us. Cots, blankets, pillows, dishware, and even fluffy cotton towels all emerged from the back of the wagon. We were beginning to fear that there wouldn't be enough room for it all. That was until one of the gentlemen making the delivery unloaded multiple storage baskets for organizing the laundry piles. Truly, Aurelia had thought of everything.

It didn't take long before the beds were lined up along the back wall with mine and Sylvia's separated from the rest. As Hazel helped me lie down onto the soft surface, I nearly melted in satisfaction. It had been so long since I had even lain completely horizontal. As soon as my head hit the plush feather pillow, the pain in my skull began to subside from the comfort. It was heavenly.

The cot was only a few inches thick and fairly narrow, but the relief it provided could not even compare to my four-post, goose-feather mattress at home. I allowed myself to doze slightly, but not fully sleep. I had to be awake before noon so I could figure out a way to meet with Peter. There was no way in the emerald realms that I was going to leave him alone with that Drancos assassin.

In between one of my dozes, I heard the front door creak, followed by heavy footsteps. I slowly arose from my bed to inspect the new visitor when I recognized the polished presence of Mr. Dwarfer. He trotted over to the new layout of bedding with a medium sized box in his arms. His eyes darted around at the new supplies, but he didn't make any visible remarks about its arrival.

"Oh, dear heavens." The man looked from me and Sylvia with a grimace, then he took a slight step backward after taking in our haggard appearances. "You poor girls look awful. It looks like I arrived just in time." He lifted a small bottle out of the box and the liquid within it illuminated dimly at his touch. The other five ladies gathered around their boss with curious looks on their faces as he held up the tonic.

"That looks like magic!" Hazel piped in, staring hypnotically at the bottle. "It would have to be by the way it's glowing." The other girls began to chatter in agreement and Mr. Dwarfer smiled brightly.

"Indeed, it is, dear." He held the bottle a little higher for a better look. "It turns out this virus you ladies have been spreading stems from the kingdom of Sybetta. It's a nasty thing that aided in wiping out half of their population a couple of decades ago. The enchanter I spoke to told me that only a touch of magic can fully cure you without months of recovery." He set the box down on the nearest shelf and unloaded eight bottles of liquid, lining them in a neat row. "I bought an elixir for each of you. I can't have my workers unable to work, now can I?" He grabbed two of the bottles in the row and walked over to where Sylvia and I were, then passed the first one to Sylvia.

"Thank you, sir." Sylvia reached out a wobbly hand to accept the bottle. Mr. Dwarfer gave her a slight smile but looked a little more repulsed than anything.

"My pleasure, dear." He turned to me and handed me my own bottle from as far away as possible. "And here is yours, Miss Ivory." I took the bottle from him and nodded my thanks. There wasn't much liquid inside of it, but it illuminated eerily with energy. Magic was so fascinating when it could be perceived.

The other girls each received their own bottle, and Glenda took two so she could deliver the remedy to Daniela. Hazel stared into hers with childlike joy as she watched the light inside glisten.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Dwarfer!" Hazel's enthusiasm jolted the older man momentarily, but he

quickly recovered into his dignified self. “Should those of us who haven’t been sick go ahead and take it? Or wait until we feel ill?” She cocked her head in intrigue while simultaneously keeping a close eye on the circulating fluids inside the bottle.

Mr. Dwarfer looked a little unsure before a look of realization flashed across his face. “Ah yes! Thank you for asking, Hazel, I had nearly forgotten.” He offered the young girl a friendly smile, then directed his gaze to the rest of the group. “You will all want to take the elixir immediately as it will provide you immunity from the disease. As for those who have already fallen ill...” He directed his attention to me and Sylvia, and I swallowed nervously at his pause. “It may take a few more days for the elixir to fully eliminate the virus, but never fear, you shall still recover far quicker than you would otherwise.” He flashed us a smile, showcasing the pride sheathed under his good will.

I began to wonder if his generosity with these elixirs had anything to do with Aurelia’s reaction to our maltreatment. I then noticed he occasionally eyed down the lavish gifts, but his composure gave none of his thoughts away.

“Thank ya, sir,” Glenda said, then popped the cork off her bottle. “We appreciate the kindness and won’t let it go to waste.” She tipped her head back and downed the entire bottle in one full gulp. The other ladies watched for a moment in intrigue, but Glenda showed no distinct signs of unpleasantly toward the taste. This encouraged the others to pop their elixirs open and gulp them down as well.

I fiddled with the cork on my own for a moment before finally knocking it free. Without further hesitation, I drank the entire bottle without so much as trying to taste it. It had a fizzy consistency, accompanied by a warming sensation. The effect reminded me of alcohols I had tasted at castle events, but it was far less smooth.

I felt a rush of relief after swigging down the contents. Now I could go help Peter. Even if I wasn’t feeling my best, at least I knew I was on the mend. Mr. Dwarfer collected the empty bottles from everyone, then placed them back inside the box.

“Hope you girls get well soon.” He gave Sylvia and I an awkward wink, then made his way out the door. “Have a good day, ladies! I’ll check in with you in a few days!” he shouted without turning back to see the others wave.

My ears perked up as the chime of the distant clock tower signaled it was now eleven o’clock. The sound spiked my adrenaline to life, and I began to crawl out of my bed. I had barely made it out from under the sheets when a tall shadow loomed over me.

“Now where do you think yer going, missy?” I froze at the stern voice and looked up to see Glenda crossing her arms in disapproval. “What makes ya think you can get outta bed so soon?” Her aged features were furrowed into her signature frown. Glenda’s voice resonated with strong disapproval much in the way my nannies used to when I was disobedient.

“I just need some fresh air,” I replied with false innocence. Her scary dark brown eyes looked right through me. I shakily stood to my feet to match her level at little better. “The elixir feels like it is already working, and I think a little walk might help it move through my system faster.” I put on a fake smile trying to persuade her that I was in good enough shape to go out alone.

“Listen ‘ere, young lady” Glenda didn’t look convinced as she dug her gaze into me with a cold glare. “I don’t wanna have to pull your frosty behind out of the woods this afternoon. If you got out there, just know that none of us are gonna go searching for ya if you don’t turn up later.” She tried to sound intimidating, but I could sense a sliver of worry in her tone.

“I should be fine for just a little walk.” I held myself tall in an attempt to display health. “Besides, the fresh air should be good for me.”

Glenda looked at me with squinted eyes, trying to crack through my bluff. She then she leaned back and sighed as if the battle wasn't worth the efforts. "Alright... just be careful," She exhaled in exasperation. "Geez, you're more stubborn than my own daughter," she murmured, but most of the room caught it. I couldn't help but feel a small rush of sentiment upon hearing her compare me to her child.

Without further ado, I adorned my coat and boots and rushed through the woods as quickly as my aching body would allow me. I had lied about the elixir already working. Aside from the slight relief that came from resting on the cot, I still felt as ill as I did this morning. My head began to throb as I made my way to the edge of the outpost. The breaths I took were heavy and shallow.

We had agreed to meet near the outpost despite it being such a long distance for me to travel on foot. It hadn't seemed like such a big deal at the time, but now it felt like the worst idea in history. I sat on a wet patch of ground, trying to catch my breath, when a hand snuck onto my shoulder. I jumped to my feet, nearly shrieking from the startle, but quickly recognized the familiar captain standing before me.

"You need to stop scaring me like that," I said in a hushed voice, still trying to catch my breath. "We need to work on your greeting skills." I meant the statement as a joke, but his kind face was contorted with concern.

"You look pale." His words were flat, but his eyes looked frantic.

"I'm alright," I lied blankly. We didn't have time to deal with how I was feeling. "It's only a simple illness. I took a remedy for it this morning, so I should be feeling better any minute now. Is everything set up for the plan?" I attempted to change the subject, but he didn't look ready to move past it.

"Yes, everything is ready. Are you certain you can go through with it?" His cold, expressionless exterior was long gone. His apprehension about pursuing the plan was on full display, but it was too late now.

"Yes, I will be fine." I gave him the most convincing smile I could manage, but he didn't look at ease. "Is the carriage ready?"

He stepped back, standing at attention, clearly accepting that I wasn't backing out. "It is. We should stop dawdling and get you ready," he said, his voice deadpan, but determined. Peter led me through the woods to a small clearing where a simplistic black carriage awaited with two lone soldiers. Taking my hand, he directed me into the clearing and approached the two men.

"Your Highness, this is Frederick and Thomas." He pointed to the two men, who bowed in respect. "They are my most trusted and loyal men. I have fully explained your situation to them, as well as the transport plans for the day." The men looked to me with confident loyalty and instantly, I felt safe in their presence.

"It is an honor to serve you, Your Highness," the blonde-haired man named Fredrick said with friendly composure. He was shorter than the other men, but looked just as capable to stand up to a fight.

"We swear to protect you at all costs, princess. Your safety is our highest priority." Thomas' voice was much deeper than Peter's, and his dark brown beard held tufts of gray in it. The gentlemen assisted me into the carriage with Peter climbing in behind me. Once we were safely inside, he opened a hidden bench seat and pulled out a few small daggers.

"Take these." He handed me two petite blades no longer than my hand. "Keep one in your sleeve and the other in your boot. If for any reason my men can't keep the assailant out of the cabin, I don't want you to be defenseless." I held the small weapons in my palm, feeling a rush of nausea from the

shining metal. It reminded me far too much of the weapon the silver knight had wielded, and I already wasn't feeling my best. I tucked the blades into their appropriate places, mostly to remove the memory from my direct sight.

"Thank you, Peter," I whispered, hoping to calm both of our nerves. "I have faith that this will work." I gathered my courage and placed my hand affectionately atop his. He jolted slightly from the touch, and I almost pulled away, but then he relaxed back into his seat.

"I will feel better when that beast is behind bars, and you are safe again." He kept his eyes trained on my hand, avoiding looking into my eyes. He may have been more anxious than I was. "I hope for Isalla's sake that this works." Inhaling a deep breath, he took my hand into his own with a tight squeeze.

Time passed in slow motion as we tensely sat in the coach together. Per the plan, Thomas and Frederick spent the time inspecting the carriage wheels and tending to the horses. The goal was to make it look like we were taking our time to prepare for a covert journey. Peter remained in the back corner of the coach, out of view from the window. I, on the contrary, sat directly in front of the window, gazing out intentionally. After an elongated inspection of the carriage, Thomas poked his head into the cabin and announced he was going to collect one more necessity before we left.

This was the moment of truth. With Thomas gone and only Fredrick standing guard, I was left severely undefended. I gazed out the window with nervous anticipation, eyeing the woods for even a single falling leaf. A couple of minutes passed, and I felt my heart sink. *Were we too vague? Or were we too obvious?* My hopes for luring the assassin were beginning to fade when a sudden noise shot my attention back out the window.

He was here.

An arrow had landed in the spoke of the carriage wheel, locking it into place. Had the intention been to run away, he would have already thwarted us. I watched from the corner of the window as Fredrick jumped down from the box seat and pulled a sword out to face the man in black. A sudden rush of fear flowed through me as I felt the gravity of the situation dawn on me. Was this even a good idea? No matter what I thought, it was too late to back out now.

I was beginning to feel dizzy from the rush of adrenaline and the ailments seizing my body when Peter snapped me back into reality.

"Get inside quickly!" He opened the storage compartment in the bench seat and I hurried into the cramped space. Before he shut the lid, he gave me one last look of dismay before switching to an aggressive determination. He closed the lid, and I heard the click of the lock placed over the latch.

This carriage was built to military standards, meaning it would take more than just one tenacious man to tear it apart. Even if the man made his way into the cabin, he would have to track down the key from Thomas to get me out. I lay back on the solid metal floor, carefully listening to the sounds outside of my metal surroundings, feeling a wince of terror at every yell.

I could make out three distinct voices. One was Peter's, one was Fredrick, and one was the deep, chilling voice of my attempted killer. I didn't hear Thomas amongst the voices, which was a good sign. His part in this plan was to watch from the edge of the forest. If the battle became too fierce for Fredrick and Peter to handle, then he would join the fray to help the odds. If the fight was still falling out of their favor, then they would use their emergency whistles to summon reinforcements.

I took long, deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart. The crowded compartment was growing warm from my body heat, and my faint feeling from earlier had returned. My head flooded with pain, and I no longer felt like I could take a full breath. The sounds from outside blurred into

white noise as my vision grew fuzzy in the already dark space.

Despite my deafening misery, I suddenly caught the addition of a new voice in the fray. I began to hyperventilate, panicking at the addition of Thomas. This wasn't good. I squirmed as much as could against the restricting walls. The anticipation of the fight's outcome was too much to bear, and I needed to get out. I thrashed my limbs, trying to achieve even the slightest amount of lift from the sealed lid. I huffed unsteadily as sweat beaded across my forehead.

The sounds of conflict grew nearer. Suddenly, the entire coach lurched, and I felt movement in the cabin. The voices were perfectly clear. Peter's aggressive grunts and huffs were partnered with the labored breath of the all too familiar beast. I felt sick as I listened to each and every parry of their blades, terrified that Peter was the one on the defensive.

"Give me back that blasted key!" Peter's voice was filled with heated rage, but his words made me grow cold.

Key? He couldn't have...

Intently, I listened for any sign of Thomas's voice but heard nothing. Had he been killed? What about Fredrick? The assassin couldn't possibly have found the key, could he?

The intensity of the situation became too much for me. I felt overwhelmed with fever and terror. The pounding in my head pulsed throughout my whole body as the heat and adrenaline dragged me into unconsciousness. As my vision began to fade, I heard the clang of metal hitting the ground, followed by an agonizing yell of pain. I was too senseless to conclude whose voice it was. Blackness enveloped me as the key clicked into the lock, and the top of the bench lifted. The last thing I saw was a hand reaching toward me as the last of the light disappeared.

chapter fourteen

Heat swallowed me in my sleep. My body burned from the inside out with unforgiving fever. My mind remained in sleep, though I could vaguely make out voices around me. When my eyes finally began to strain open, I recognized the figure of a tall, dark-haired man sitting at my bedside. Rapidly, I blinked to clear my vision and discovered that the man was, in fact, Peter. Seeing him alive alongside me caused relief to sweep over me as a tear of joy slid down my cheek, accompanied by a subtle inhale. The quiet sound was enough to turn the captain's eyes toward my sickly form. His eyes lit up and he instantly grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

"You're awake, thank heavens." His voice was thick with worry while his expressive eyes showed so much fear and relief. "I found you unconscious in the carriage after the fight. You had such a high fever, I wasn't sure you would wake up, but my magic managed to calm it enough to keep you with me." His grip tightened and I noticed his eyes and hair were alight. He was healing me even now.

"Peter, what happened with the assassin?" My throat felt parched and cracked my voice. Peter quickly placed a glass of water into my free hand, and I sat up slowly to drink the cool liquid. It was delicious, and I drank the whole glass in one sitting. He took the empty cup from me and I finally noticed where I had been resting. I recognized the fabric walls and peaked roof of Peter's tent. Meaning this must be his bed...

I blushed at the realization, causing Peter to touch my cheeks in search of more fever. I hoped that's all he thought it was. He rested his hand back down and looked into my eyes before he answered my question. "We did it." his tender smile showcased a glint of pride. "It took all three of us, and both Frederick and Thomas suffered a few injuries. But we caught him; he is in my custody." He gave me a sweet laugh that crinkled up the corners of eyes. Excitement from accomplishment filled my heart, and I gave a soft laugh in return.

That was it. I was safe now. No more countdowns, no more murderous timelines.

"That's amazing, Peter." I wiped a stagnant tear from my eye. "I knew you could do it. Are Thomas and Frederick going to be alright?" I was unsure if I could handle the answer. Those men risked their lives to protect me and my kingdom. I desperately hoped they were alright.

"They're a little beaten," He dropped his gaze and his tone shifted slightly, revealing his dismay, "but they've been through worse. Fredrick took a pretty strong blow to the ribs and Thomas suffered a sword wound in his right leg, but they're tough. I have already treated them in between healing you, and I'm certain they'll be back on their feet in no time." He cast me a reassuring look and I felt a little better.

"Thank goodness they're alright." I let out a held breath not realizing I had been holding it. "I don't know if I could live with myself had they been severely injured." Peter gave me a short laugh, then gently released my hand. The glow from his eyes and hair subsided.

"They are your soldiers, princess," He shot me his signature grin with full amusement. "They would gladly lay their lives down for you, and they certainly wouldn't want you to dwell on a few injuries they sustained from doing their duty." His lightheartedness eased my worry, but I wasn't going to apologize for valuing my soldiers' lives. That was one thing that was going to be different between me and my father.

"Where is the assassin now?" I sat up a little straighter in bed. My curiosity urged me to get more involved. "Have you had a chance to question him at all?"

He stood up from his stool, crossing the space to fill my water glass from a full pitcher. "He is being detained at the north end of the compound." He poured the glass full then returned it to my hands. "Thomas has had the honor of watching him for now, but he hasn't said a word yet." He sat with a frustrated thud.

I scrunched up my own face in annoyance at the information. "Maybe he will talk to me?" I shrugged. The remark earned me an instant look of disapproval from Peter. "If he is fully detained, then there shouldn't be any risk in simply speaking with him. Plus, we need some form of confession if the plan is going to succeed." I sipped my water innocently, trying to avoid the daggered glare he gave me. I knew he wouldn't like the idea, but we didn't have many options.

"The man is tricky," He said cautiously, trying to avoid shutting me down directly. "He fights in a manner that highlights trickery and misdirection. I am certain his lying skill will possess similar training. He clearly isn't an ordinary mercenary-for-hire." I watched as his face contorted into deep thought and he stood to pace as he typically did. "But... I suppose there's no use in keeping him locked up unless we can prove why. Very well, I shall let you speak with him under my supervision, of course." Peter turned to me and I nearly jumped out of bed at his approval.

"Wonderful!" I started making my way out of the stiff bed, wiggling my toes to life before I placed them on the floor, but Peter stepped in front of me.

"Hold on just a moment." He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at my attempt to rise. "You are in no condition to be moving around just yet. Your fever has been managed for the moment, but my magic is being repelled by another force. It's just like the illness my men have been facing." The distress in his voice mixed with his authoritative presence. I knew he was only worried, but I wasn't ready to slow down yet.

"It's alright, Peter." I pushed past him and rose uneasily to my feet. "I have already taken a healing elixir that should stop the virus from growing any worse. I'm sure you're correct to assume that resting would help me recover sooner, but I have too much to do to worry about that." I located my boots and began to slip them onto my feet. My head still ached from all the movement, but Peter's magic had taken most of the edge off. He looked me over, unconvinced of my self-assured health, but he must have decided it wasn't worth the argument.

"Very well, princess," he said in defeat. "Just promise that if you feel any worse, you will alert me. I can't do much against this disease, but I can at least ease your symptoms enough to avoid further blackouts."

I gave a nod of agreement, promising to keep tabs on my body's needs. "Agreed." I fetched my cloak from the familiar peg hammered into the cabinet. "Shall we be off, then? I don't wish to worry the ladies at the mill for much longer. After all, they only believe I am out on a walk." I felt energized from the healing magic coursing from my hand and wanted to get right to the point. Peter gave me a skeptical look at my new-found enthusiasm, but I pulled my hood up and kept walking. Sure enough, he followed right behind me, keeping me within his sights. Once outside, I realized I had no idea where I was going and had to wait up for Peter to step into the cold with me.

He gave me a knowing look at my lack of direction before leading me to a beautiful white stallion around the back of tent. We mounted the handsome creature together with Peter seated in front of me. In order not to fall, I firmly wrapped my arms around his torso. My face pressed close to his back, and I could smell his comforting scent of pine and sunshine. I tried to keep a little distance between our bodies during the short ride, but our steed wasn't exactly the smoothest of mounts. The animal's jostling drove me closer to him until I finally just gave up and held him as tight as I could. The ride only lasted a few minutes, taking us across the entire length of the outpost. A few sparse

soldiers had glanced our way during the ride, but Peter seemed relatively unworried. My face was hidden under the hood of my cloak, and the major threat to my life was safely imprisoned. I noticed that there were far fewer soldiers about than there had been on my last visit, but then I remembered what Peter had said about their spreading illness. Sure enough, the medical tents we passed were flooded over with sickly men. I needed to tell Peter about the elixirs Mr. Dwarfer had found when this was over.

We were at a secluded portion of the camp when Peter finally pulled the stallion to a stop. Brush grew over the edges of the clearing, encompassing a small rounded tent. Wooden spikes lined the circumference of the fabric walls half buried in the dirt. Their sharp points were directed with sickly aim at the edges of the walls to perform a line of defense against any escapees. I shuddered at the thought of them being needed. Once we dismounted, Peter placed himself in front of me, clearly wanting to take the lead.

“Stay behind me,” he directed in a strong tone. “He is bound well, but I’m not taking any more risks today.” He remained frozen until I nodded in agreement, then proceeded forward.

Thomas stepped out with his sword in hand as we approached the tent. A bloodstained bandage was wrapped tightly around his right thigh, but his composure gave no impression that he was in pain. When he recognized the captain and me, he lowered his sword and gave a slight bow.

“At ease, Thomas,” Peter commanded. “We have come to see the prisoner. Has he said anything since my last check-in?” His voice sounded level and calm, yet I was beginning to recognize when he was holding out for hope.

“Well, he did say one word...” Thomas smirked while sheathing his weapon, “though I would rather not repeat such vulgarities in front of the lady.” He gave a light chuckle, receiving an annoyed look from Peter. “Oh, and I found this hidden on his person.” He handed the captain a crinkled-up letter. I watched over Peter’s shoulder as he traced his finger over the broken seal. It bore only a plain rectangle with few embellishments, not much clue to his employer. He opened the enveloped and I snuck a peak at the two words written in clear ink.

Request approved.

“Very well then.” Peter sighed. “It seems everyone enjoys being vague. We shall see if he has anything more useful to say to his victim.” He turned to me and outstretched his hand. I accepted the gesture, and he pulled me closer than I was anticipating from the offer. “Are you certain you want to do this?” He asked, his words intimately quiet. I felt a little shy from his actions with Thomas nearby, but the older man paid no attention.

“I am,” I confirmed clearly. “I have come this far, and I am not stopping now.” Determination blazed through my eyes and the captain subsided to my reply.

“Then allow me to introduce you.” His voice was grave as he led me into the unlit tent. Thomas entered first, followed by Peter and me. The tent was held up by a tall metal pole that appeared to be deeply cemented into the ground. At the base of the support sat a tall, muscular man dressed in all black. His feet were bound in both rope and chains, and his hands were fastened across the metal pole. His mask had been removed, so I could finally look upon his face. It was rather unsettling. He was rather attractive, much like a siren would be before you were dragged down to your death. His ice-blue eyes rose eerily to mine as a snakelike grin spread across his lips. I felt an uncomfortable shiver creep down my spine from his gaze, but I brushed it off. I was the one in the power position now.

“Well, well, well...” the vile man looked pleased at my appearance, “I was hoping my playmate would come find me.” His voice flashed memories of our first encounter into my head. I squeezed

Peter's hand for assurance of his protection, and he whipped out a dagger to pass to Thomas. The soldier took the blade without any hesitation and held it to the man's throat.

"If you so much as insult the young lady, I'll scar that pretty face of yours." Thomas's voice was frighteningly serious, but effective. The man leaned his head back into the steel pole in silent submission to the blade.

"No need to be so excitable, captain." His creepy grin flashed a row of perfect teeth. "The princess and I are old friends at this point. I'm sure we can communicate like civilized companions." His gaze roamed over my stiff form, looking to antagonize some type of reaction.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward with the confidence of a born ruler. "Our companionship shall depend on how well you answer my questions," I said boldly, stepping in front of Peter to face the man. Peter flinched in disagreement to my pursuit but allowed me to pass. "Who are you? And who is your true employer?" I drove a piercing glare into his blue eyes.

While he didn't appear intimidated, instead, he looked almost impressed. "My dear princess, I already told you, I was sent by Drancos." His words sounded condescending as if he were talking down to a child. "As for who I am... well, I hardly see how that matters. My true name shall mean nothing to you, but since we're friends, I will let you in on my alias." He narrowed his eyes, still adorning his sickly smile. "They call me 'the mirror.'" His head cocked to the side as if the information should have ticked a nerve.

I raised an eyebrow at the strange title. "The mirror?" I had been expecting something much more intimidating. "Is that in reference to the mirrored armor you wore the night we met?" I considered the idea, though it seemed unlikely.

"Fascinating theory, but I'm afraid not." He laughed at me harshly, and I noticed Peter tense in my peripheral. "You see, my dear, I excel at reflecting people's true selves." He leaned forward into the edge of Thomas's blade, not even flinching as the steel grazed his skin. "Life or death situations really bring out the worst in some people, Your Highness. It is truly captivating to watch an individual's reaction in the face of danger. With just a little motivation, even the most diplomatic of people display their true selves as clearly as looking in a mirror." His eyes gleamed in twisted glee as a trickle of blood ran down the edge of his neck. Thomas held his blade firmly in place against the pressure the mirror man provided, clearly not intimidated by his nerve.

I watched uncomfortably as the man leaned away from the blade without even an ounce of fear on his face. His words rolled over in my mind as I tried to interpret the meaning behind them.

"Are you implying that you only intended to threaten my life to invoke my reaction?" I asked, uncertain if it was truly what I meant to say. Why would someone go to the trouble of hiring an assassin to not even kill? I thought back to the arrow that had whizzed past my skull in the forest a week ago. That shot had nearly taken my life. Surely, he had intended to kill me then... unless he hadn't.

The man looked at me ominously and lowered his smile to a straight expression. Well, what fun would the game be if I just told you all the rules?" His eyes glassed over maliciously. "Now that I have answered your questions, tell me why you're keeping me penned up like a puppy instead of shipping me off to the capital?" He sounded genuinely curious, but something in me felt like this was a trap. If he was aligned with King Garrett, he would most likely to tempt me to return to the castle with him. I needed to be careful with what I said.

"I intend to make you stand trial for your crimes." My tone sounded calm and even. If he could play coy, then so could I. "In preparation for the trial, I wanted to give you the opportunity to openly confess in private before bringing you before the court." His eyes widened in fascination and a

strange touch of excitement. “To make the process easier on all parties involved, I am prepared to offer you a deal.” I raised my chin confidently, keeping my eyes trained tightly on his.

“Oh...?” He half smiled in anticipation. “And what deal might that be?”

“The promise of a lessened sentence in return for a written confession.” I watched his face contort into confusion before he leaned forward in further intrigue. “I will provide you with quill and paper. If you write out a full confession of your crimes for me to bring forth to the court, then I swear on my kingdom that I shall lessen the severity of your judgment.” My face remained relaxed, but internally, I anxiously waited for his reply. If I had physical evidence of his involvement with Drancos, then I could finally be rid of King Garrett.

“An intriguing offer, Your Highness.” He rested his head against the metal pole, pursing his lips in consideration. “What specifically would you require me to write?” I felt a little startled by his quick response. Part of me didn’t think he would even consider the idea.

“All you would need to write is your involvement in my disappearance.” I took another step forward and sensed Peter follow close behind me. “Include everything you told me before you set me loose, and don’t leave out any details. If the letter adequately meets my requests, then I shall guarantee that I shall use my royal dictation to lower the intensity of your ruled punishment.” I towered over him in an attempt to vanquish my fears of this vile man. He was the one on the ground now; he had to strain his neck to look up to me, but he did so anyway in a slow stretch.

“If that’s what the lady wants...” His sly grin held a suspicious tinge to it. “Provide me the needed materials, and I will gladly give you a written confession of everything I previously stated.” He lowered his head and gazed over to Peter. “Would the captain be so kind as to release my hand? I can’t necessarily write with my tongue, now can I?” He winked at Peter, who in turn, glared at him. It was clearly taking a massive amount of restraint for Peter not to murder the man where he sat. I looked to Peter with a gentle expression, silently requesting the same thing.

“I’ll get you your blasted paper,” Peter snapped, “after the princess is back in a safe location.” He reached his hand out to me with pleading eyes and I accepted it. I had put him through enough stress in pursuit of my goals today. It was time I let him do his job.

“I’ll be back in an hour, Thomas. Signal for Fredrick if the brute needs any further attention.” Peter passed an understanding nod to Thomas, who stepped back from the prisoner, returning to his guard post.

The bound man chuckled softly. “How sweet of you, captain.” He directed his steel eyes to Peter. “I do enjoy the company. Perhaps we should invite the whole battalion for a spot of tea later.” His chides coaxed a growling noise out of Peter. The sound shocked me as I had never seen him so worked up before.

Without waiting for the man to provoke him any further, Peter took my hand and led me out the doorway and assisted me onto the back of the white horse. He remained quiet on the trot back to the main tent, so I wrapped myself tightly around his torso, hoping to ease his tension. It must have helped because he placed one of his hands over top mine. When we arrived back at the post, he lifted me off the horse with the most graceful ease. I smiled to him gratefully, lingering in his arms for a moment longer than necessary.

“Will you be alright getting back on your own?” His eyes were soft, warming my heart. “I can give you a ride back if you like.” He kept a hold on my hand as I slowly pulled away from his arms, his thumb gently stroking the back of hand in a soothing motion.

“Thank you, but I should fare fine on my own.” I smiled sweetly. In actuality, I wanted to take him up on his offer. My body still ached from illness and my energy was suffering from my earlier

collapse, but I wasn't willing to risk our new friend changing his mind about writing the confession. The sooner the paper was in hand, the better. "The walk isn't that long and I feel much better than I did the first trip." I gave him a convincing smile that seemed to fool him. I felt bad for lying to him, but Isalla needed to come before a few body aches.

"Very well then." Reluctantly, he released my hand and I frowned at the lack of touch. "Do you have a candidate in mind for the next phase of the plan?" He switched back to soldier-mode with his flat tone and serious expression, and I instantly missed his soft nature.

"I do," I confirmed. "Aurelia Lockly should serve as the perfect witness." I smiled proudly and Peter looked impressed.

His bewildered expression cast a smile upon my face. "You know Lady Lockly?" he questioned, obviously interested. "She is a part of the highest-ranking family outside of the capital. If you can convince her to speak on your behalf, you should have no trouble persuading the court to dissolve the engagement."

"She is actually a close friend of mine... well, of Annie's." I shrugged off the small detail, but Peter looked even more confused. "We met at the mill and have since bonded. I am certain she would act as a witness for me if I asked her. Obviously, she doesn't know I'm the princess yet, but that should only make her statement stronger. She witnessed my hiding firsthand. With her by my side, and the confession in hand, Isalla should be rid of the Draconian family in no time." I beamed with excitement, and Peter matched my joy with his own smile.

"Well done, Your Highness." His compliment sent a strong sense of satisfaction through me. "I shall retrieve the letter at once, then meet you at the mill so we can travel to the Lockly estate together." He let out a relaxed breath as his tension seemed to ease now that the plan was proving successful.

"Perfect." I fastened my cloak firmly around my neck in preparation to leave. "That should give me enough time to say goodbye to the women at the mill." I felt my heart grow heavy at the thought of leaving them for good. "I'm going to tell them everything. I owe them that much after all they have done for me. We should be able to return to the palace by the end of the day, so I don't fear that they will spread any gossip before I can return to the court. Plus, I trust them not to betray me." Each of their faces flooded through my mind sorrowfully as Peter placed an understanding hand upon my shoulder.

"I completely respect your decision." His encouragement boosted me. "Now we should get going if we want to make it back to the palace tonight." He began to walk back into the tent to gather the quill and paper as I set out for the forest. I had just reached the edge of the woods when I heard him call out one last time.

"Be safe, Arabella."

chapter fifteen

The walk through the woods was just as physically taxing as the first. By the time I had reached the edge of the forest, I was huffing heavily and beginning to feel faint again. Maybe I should have been more honest with Peter about how I was feeling. I cursed myself mentally for not accepting his offer on a ride. I could finally see the mill in front of me as I pushed through the last of the brush. My footsteps became heavy as the last of my stamina drained with each pace.

Right as I reached the side entrance, the sound of carriage wheels halted me from opening the door. I looked across the way and instantly recognized the Lockly family crest on the vehicle's door. *What perfect timing this was!*

I turned from the door and staggered in front of the carriage as it pulled to a stop. As anticipated, a bouncy golden head of curls poked out of the window with an eager expression.

"Annie!" Aurelia's sing-song voice was vibrant as usual. "I was just on my way to ensure the deliveries had all arrived! Is Sylvia doing well?" She opened up the door to the carriage but stopped before stepping down. "Oh, Annie, you look rather pale. Are you alright?" She took a cautious step with growing concern on her face.

"I will be fine, and Sylvia will, too," I reassured. Her worried look didn't change much at my words. "I'm actually glad to see you, Aurelia. I was hoping to seek an audience with you today. You see, there is something urgent I must ask of you, my friend." My tone grew serious, and Aurelia seemed to recognize the gravity of the situation.

"Yes, of course." She stepped back inside the carriage and gestured for me to join. "Please come in, we can speak privately in here." Her typically joyful blue eyes now looked troubled.

"Thank you." I pulled my unwilling body up the steps with more effort than should have been necessary. Aurelia noticed my struggle and stood to assist me into my seat. I sat slowly, and Aurelia closed the door behind me, settling into her seat anxiously. "First off, I need to be honest with you about a few things..." I took a deep breath before focusing my eyes on hers. "My name is not Annie. I am Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria of Isalla." I let out my breath and watched her eyes grow wide in shock.

"You...? You're...? In all the realms, I would have never guessed!" The poor girl was completely flabbergasted and struggled to put her words together. "That explains so much! Like why you were so interested in politics, and your sudden arrival at the mill, and your educated diction. Maybe I should have realized it myself!" She smacked her forehead in complete awe.

"I hope you can forgive me for lying to you." I wrapped my arms around my body nervously. I wouldn't blame her if she was angry at me. "Please understand that everything I did was for the protection of Isalla and selfishly, my own life." I lowered my eyes in shame, remembering how much time I had spent hiding without purpose.

"Oh, Annie... I mean Your Highness!" she corrected herself in a panic, but I humbly laughed at her startle. "I don't blame you for keeping your identity a secret. But why were you hiding in the first place? Is it true that you ran away?" She leaned forward with anticipation, her eyes strongly thirsting for information.

"I didn't run... well, not at first." I thought back to my escape into the woods. "I was tricked out of the castle, then threatened to either run or be killed." Aurelia gasped in horror placing a hand over her mouth.

I told the rest of the story as quickly as I could without leaving out any important details. Aurelia

sat quietly with rapt attention, only asking the occasional question for clarification. By the time I got around to the capture of the assassin, she had already guessed what I needed from her.

“So, you need me to serve as a reputable witness?”

“Exactly.” I nodded assuredly. “Would you be willing?” I gave her an imploring look, and she instantly lit up with an inner fire.

“Of course, I will.” She stood courageously to her feet, ready to drag the man to court herself. “We can leave for the castle as soon as the captain returns with the document.” Her tiny body was almost shaking with pent-up aggression. “The sooner we get that nasty King Garret and his son out of our kingdom the better.”

I grabbed at her sleeve before she could sprint full force at the castle walls. “Thank you, Aurelia, but I can’t leave quite yet.” I pointed toward the mill with a solemn expression. “First, there are a few friends I owe an explanation and a goodbye.” I sighed grievously and Aurelia instantly caught my implication.

“I’m sorry, princess,” she sympathized, returning to her seat. “Take as much time as you need. I’ll wait here for you and Peter, and then we can depart.” She gave me an understanding smile and I offered one in return.

“I appreciate that.” I rose to my feet, feeling my head spin slightly from the movement. “I shouldn’t be too long, and neither should Peter.” I opened the carriage door and took a step forward before turning back to Aurelia. “Oh, and please call me Arabella from now on. Princess is far too formal for a mill maid.” I winked playfully and she giggled as I stepped onto the icy ground.

It had begun to snow since I had stepped into the Lockly carriage. I took slow, careful steps to the side door to avoid any unfortunate spills. When I finally reached the entrance, my body was already demanding that I sit down again, but it would have to wait. I pushed the door open and felt the relieving heat from the familiar fireplace. As expected, seven pairs of eyes trailed my entrance as I stepped through the heavy door. I smiled at them sweetly, anticipating looks of worry and questions toward my absence, but surprisingly, they remained quiet. Every one of them just stared at me with frozen expressions on their face. Hazel took a slight step forward with a fearful look in her eye, and I was beginning to think something terrible may have happened when I was gone.

“Is everything alright?” I looked around the room frantically, taking a mental headcount of everyone present. To my relief, both Daniela and Sylvia were on their feet at the washboards, looking far healthier than they had. “Did something happen while I was out? I’m sorry I left for so long... I was hoping to talk with you all about that.” I took a few steps toward them, but nobody moved. I looked to Hazel for answers, and she finally spoke up.

“Annie, is it true?” Her voice was quiet and timid. “You’re not really Annie, are you?” Her eyes expressed a hope that the statement was just a lie, and I felt my heart sink at her broken reaction to the truth.

How had they found out?

“I’m so sorry, Hazel.” I dropped my voice to a gentle tone. “It’s true. My name isn’t Annie at all.” I lowered my head, not ready to see the hurt expressions on their face, but nobody appeared hurt... they seemed angry.

“Who do you think you are taking advantage of us like that!?” Glenda spat angrily, and I was fully taken aback by her rage. I had expected them to be upset, but this was intense.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have a choice...” My voice cracked as I choked back tears that threatened to flow. The pain of their anger seared through me like a hot knife.

“We trusted you!” Delilah shouted. “How long have you been planning to rob us blind? Were you

disappointed when you realized how broke we all were?" She hurled her words in frustration, but I didn't understand what she was saying.

Rob them?

"Is that why you made friends with Lady Lockly?" Bethanne cried out with tears running down her face. "How could you take advantage of such a kind-hearted girl?" She cried loudly, and I felt an urge to comfort her through her pain.

What was going on here? I never took advantage of anyone, did I? Confusion pulsed through me when suddenly, the girls' insults were silence by a new face parting through the crowd.

"Well, well, well..." Mr. Dwarfer, who looked equally upset, stepped in front of the girls to stand before me. "The thief has decided to return." He crossed his arms, glaring at me accusingly.

"Thief?" I looked around the room as if in a daze. Where would they get that idea from? "I have never stolen anything in my life." I pressed my hand to my chest as I declared innocence.

"Is that so?" Mr. Dwarfer laughed condescendingly, at my statement then dug through his pockets. Something jingled loudly within, and my mouth fell open as he pulled out a handful of jewelry. "I found these in your locker after your sudden disappearance." He held up the glittering jewels for everyone to see. The girls shunned away from the ornaments, shielding themselves from their feared truth.

"N-no you don't understand!" My words stuttered from shock. No wonder they were all angry with me. "Those are mine! That's what I came to tell everyone, I'm not actually Annie at—.

"Of course, you're not Annie!" He boomed as he approached far quicker than I would have expected, then jabbed an accusing finger into my shoulder. The force nearly knocked my frail body onto the ground. "You're the bandit, Ivory Meta, known for disguising yourself as common servants to avoid suspicion as you steal from the rich!" He spat in my face as he hurled his words.

Astonished, I stepped back at his absurd claim. I had never heard of such a bandit, nor was I her.

"Mr. Dwarfer, you're mistaken, I'm not a bandit at all." I held up my hands defensively as he continued to get up in my face. "My real name is Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria. I'm the missing princess, and I have been hiding here in fear of my life for the last week and a half." I rattled as quickly as I could while simultaneously backing away from the enraged man.

He was determined to knock me down. Desperately, I looked around at the other girls for help, but they remained frozen. However, they looked far more shocked than angry now. Most of their mouths hung open in bewilderment, and Hazel had both of her hands clasped over her mouth.

"Lies!" Mr. Dwarfer screamed as his outrage grew exponentially at my words, turning his face a bright shade of red. "You have been stealing from me this whole time, and you expect to get away with it! You ungrateful brat! You'll regret ever stepping foot into my business." He pushed me to the ground, and I fell with a yelp. I saw Hazel and Daniela rush forward to my defense right as my vision was blinded by washing solution. I gazed up through the blur and saw that in his rage, he had poured an entire bottle of apple-scented soap over my head.

The sticky fluid seeped through my clothes and irritated my skin as it spread all over me. I wiped the fluid from my eyes on a clean section of my apron and looked up just in time to see Hazel, Delilah, and Susan hold Mr. Dwarfer back with all their strength. Moments later, Bethanne and Sylvia joined in the fray, and the five girls had him pinned to the floor. Glenda and Daniela rushed over to where I lay sprawled on the floor and helped me to my feet.

"What in all the realms is wrong with you?!" Glenda yelled viscously at the thrashing man as she held my weight with her arms. My head spun from the strong fumes of the cleaner. "Can't ya listen to

the girl!? She said she didn't do it, and I, for one, think she deserves to be heard!" She stood her ground firmly as she glared down at the petrified man. I felt honored to have such a strong woman defend me. I would have hugged her if I hadn't been covered in apple-scented slime.

"Surely, it's a misunderstanding, sir," Daniela murmured, but still had a fierceness in her tone. "This young lady has been nothing but good to us since we met, and I don't believe that accusing her senselessly is going to get us anywhere." She gave my arm a comforting squeeze as my weight fell a little more toward her. I was feeling queasy from the intensity of everything and felt as if I might fall without their support.

"Thank you, everyone," I said breathlessly, as my lungs were labored. The two women that held me shared a concerned look and quickly guided me to a chair. "The jewels..." The apple scent was beginning to grow unbearable. "There should be a tiara within them. That can validate my story." I weakly pointed toward the jewelry dangling from the distraught man's pockets.

Hazel dug her hand into his vest, ignoring the man's protests, and soon produced the dainty platinum tiara. She held it up in the air where all the girls gawked at it in disbelief.

"She's telling the truth!" Hazel shouted excitedly. "I knew you couldn't be a thief, Annie—I mean, Princess Arabella! Oh, I mean, your honorableness!" She stuttered through the titles, not sure of how to proceed. The other girls laughed at her stumbling, and I weakly smiled in sympathy.

"I had a feeling that old man was full of nonsense." Glenda crossed her arms at the shrinking man, who had gone silent after Hazel had displayed the crown.

"Why would you accuse me of such a thing?" I questioned from my seat. My voice was quiet and shaken, but the words carried over the chattering girls. "What have I ever done to you?" I was genuinely wondering what would drive him to such an extreme reaction.

"I was just doing what I was told!" he shouted bitterly, managing to shove Susan and Sylvia off his arms so he could crawl to his feet. "It doesn't matter now anyway. My job here is done, and I'm through looking out for the rest of you ingrates!" He pointed toward all the girls. We all shared equally puzzled expressions, but he wasn't done.

"No one is going to listen to lowly maids like you anyway, so I should have no problem collecting the rest of my payment and selling this filthy building for good." He laughed maliciously and another wave of nausea hit me. Why was this scent making me feel so sick? I felt my temperature rise internally as I shook with ailment. My head pounded in my skull, and I suddenly wished for Peter's healing magic. I placed my hand against the whistle protruding through the fabric of my dress and considering calling for him. My blood froze as I touched the cool metal, recalling an important detail from our last meeting.

"The soldiers..." I spoke quietly, but Mr. Dwarfer's eyes grew large at the soft words. "They have been getting sick, just like Sylvia, Daniela, and I... It's been getting worse by the day for them, yet everyone here is just fine, everyone except for me." I stood unsteadily to my feet, causing Daniela and Glenda to scramble in an attempt to help me, but I stepped forward with new purpose.

"All of our illness started around the same time, but Sylvia and Daniela already look as good as new after taking their elixirs. So why have I gotten so much worse than even the soldiers, who haven't even had a proper remedy?" Slowly, I walked past the crowd of women approaching where Mr. Dwarfer stood petrified. "How long ago was it that we switched soaps again... a week maybe?" I picked up a jug of the apple-scented solution off the ground and raised it level to Mr. Dwarfer's face. "What do you think of the scent, sir? I'm not certain you ever got a chance to sample it with your busy schedule." I held the jug under his nose and his frozen form reacted quickly, knocking the solution out of my hand. The contents spilled silently across the floor.

“It’s poisoned, okay! Is that what you wanted to hear!?” The pathetic man stepped back in cowardice, but Delilah was too quick and raced to block the main door. Bethanne remained at the back door, blocking off his only routes to escape. “I don’t know why they wanted me to switch to poison! They paid me to do as I was told and to not ask questions! You twits are lucky that I was kind enough to request cures for you in case the poison impacted you first!” The man was delirious. He ran across the room to the massive shelving units and started knocking items off the shelves in a rage. “All you had to do was sit back and follow instructions!” he yelled furiously as he continued to trash everything in sight. I began to fear that he would take out his rage on one of the girls, when suddenly, Hazel halted his rampage.

The tiny girl grabbed a full tin of fireplace ashes and raced up behind the man. With both hands, she slammed the metal into the back of his head, showering cinders everywhere and effectively knocking the man unconscious. We all stood stunned for a moment as the girl calmly turned to us with a face covered in ash.

“Somebody had to do it.” She shrugged simply.

I made a mental note not to get on her bad side. With the eminent danger momentarily thwarted, I stumbled to the ground as my heart raced rapidly in an attempt to fight off the poisoned solution that was seeping through my skin. Pattering footsteps echoed in the open space as seven women huddled around me, desperately trying to wipe the polluted soap from my arms and face. I smiled up at the kind faces, ignoring their frightened eyes. Hazel squeezed my hand with tears running down her face as she mouthed words that I could no longer hear.

chapter sixteen

Despite my body's desire to sleep, I fought to keep my eyes open at all costs. The poison was rapidly moving through my body, and my skin was searing hot with fever. Aurelia had come inside after hearing the scuffle with Mr. Dwarfer. She was desperately searching through the dirty laundry piles for appropriate clothing that hadn't been washed in the tainted soap. Daniela and Glenda had already stripped me down to my corset and petticoat to wipe the toxins from my arms. The cold water provided an incredible sense of relief on my burning skin, but it wasn't helping to slow the poison that had already entered my bloodstream. After the two older women had done the best they could cleansing my skin, Aurelia rushed over with a massive dress in her arms.

"Here, try this on." The nervous girl handed me a beautiful rose-red ball gown with long, off-shoulder sleeves and a sparkling over skirt. I stared in awe at the beautiful garment for a moment before she spoke again. "It's mine. I wore it to one of my family's parties a few days ago. It was a little too long on me, so hopefully, it will fit you well." She helped me into the gown and the feeling of the lavish fabric made me feel confident enough to stand to my full height.

"Wow." Hazel gawked at the glittering skirt. "You definitely look like a princess now!" She smiled excitedly, and I gave a frail laugh in return.

"Thank you, Hazel, but I'm still just me." I smiled sweetly, and she beamed brighter. I then turned my attention to Aurelia with a serious shift in my tone. "Did you see any sign of Peter yet?" I looked to her hopefully, but she shook her head.

"No, still no sign of him." She sounded worried, and I couldn't help but feel the same.

"Okay, then here is what we need to do..." I pulled up a stool and sat in an attempt to save my declining energy. "Clearly, somebody hired Mr. Dwarfer.... I would bet it was King Garrett. He must have known where I was hiding and paid Mr. Dwarfer to poison the soap. By doing so, he could effectively kill me and weaken the royal army in preparation for a siege." Aurelia and the others gasped at the validity of this theory.

"How awful!" Susan exclaimed in horror.

"If that's true, then it means the king is also the one who sent Dwarfer the remedies," I gazed around the room at their captivated eyes. "Which means he might have more, or at least, knows the enchanter who created them. I don't know how much time I have before the poison takes me. Right now, my best chance is to return to the castle with some of the soap as evidence to my claim." I watched as looks of concern flashed between the ladies in front of me.

"I thought you need the letter and a witness of nobility to prove your claim?" Aurelia's brow furrowed with a puzzled expression. "Won't King Garrett just kill you if you return suddenly?" She brought her hand to her mouth, looking pale at the thought.

"He might if he finds me." I tried to sound brave, but my shaking body made it difficult. "I'll seek out my mother first. If I can get an audience with her long enough to explain the situation, then perhaps she can help me find the remedy. We can then make a claim toward King Garret's treason with the poison solution. It should be enough to get the court involved, at least until we can deliver the letter and Aurelia." I looked to the blonde, who still looked confused.

"Wait a moment... am I not coming with you now?" She tilted her head and I nodded.

"Not yet," I replied confidently. "I need you to go to the outpost and check on Peter. He shouldn't be taking this long, and I'm worried something may have happened. Also, I need you to warn the soldiers about their uniforms. Hopefully, exposure to the poison has been far more diluted than what

we experienced.” I looked at the spilled toxins on the floor.

“So, you intend to storm the castle... by yourself!?” Aurelia’s tone was fully disapproving. “You’ll get yourself killed for sure!”

“And if King Garrett is waiting for me, he will kill whoever escorts me as well.” I spoke firmly, hushing Aurelia. “I’m sorry, but I can’t ask you to risk your life for me. Besides, your carriage only has two horses, and we need someone to get Peter. I would say we can use Dottie, but I don’t think the old girl has the stamina for anything more than a trot.” I sighed at the idea and the girls murmured notes of understanding.

“I have more horses at home,” Aurelia added hopefully. “There’s a larger coach there too; one that could probably hold everyone. I could send for it and have it back here within maybe a half hour.” The prospect made her eyes twinkle, and I considered the idea for a moment. My head ached viciously as I tried to think through the logistics until I finally decided it couldn’t work.

“There’s no time.” I pressed a hand to my forehead in an attempt to relieve the pain. “If I delay much longer, the poison will surely overtake me.” I rose shakily to my feet to make my way toward the horses. Sylvia reached for my arm and helped to steady myself. I smiled at her gratefully, despite the ache it caused.

“We’ll go get the extra carriage.” Glenda’s strong voice carried across the room. “It’ll take us a little longer, but Hazel can take Dottie and bring it back a little faster than on foot. We’ll meet you at the castle as soon as we can.” She smiled at me reassuringly, a real smile. I had to wonder who this woman was and what she had done with Glenda.

“Perfect!” Aurelia pattered around the room before grabbing a strip of cloth and a writing utensil. She scribbled out a quick message, then passed it to Hazel. “Give this to my stable hand, and he will do as you say.”

Hazel accepted the cloth and turned toward the door. “I’ll be back soon!” She threw her cloak around her shoulders and ran out before she shouted. “Don’t die, Arabella!” Her quirky encouragement made me smile as I started toward the door. Stopping by the thrashed shelving that Mr. Dwarfer had wrecked, I picked up a smaller bottle of the poisoned soap. Making certain the lid was screwed on tightly, I wrapped it in a piece of linen and stuck it inside my interior pocket to bring as evidence. With the assistance of Sylvia and Aurelia, I managed to adorn my cloak and make it outside. Aurelia commanded for her footman to unhitch the horses, which the man did diligently. With a lot of help, I managed to mount a dark brown mare with a beautiful black mane.

“This is Saffron.” Aurelia patted the horse’s snout lovingly. “She’s the fastest horse we own. Hold on tight, and she’ll get you there safe.” She gave me an encouraging smile before stepping away from the reigns. “Oh! And you need one more thing!” She reached into her pocket and pulled out my simple tiara I had brought with me so many nights ago. “If you’re going to storm the castle to save yourself and your kingdom, you might as well look like the princess you are!” She gave me a small laugh and stretched upward to place the ornament in my hand. I offered her a weak but gracious smile as I accepted it and gently crowned myself. The weight of the metal felt both foreign and familiar.

“Well, I was always taught that appearances matter above all.” I rolled my eyes at the notion and shared a laugh with the fellow girls. “Thank you.” Aurelia smiled, then turned to her own horse.

She climbed up onto her mount with just about as much difficulty as I had. After struggling to swing her bunches of skirt over the side of the horse, she hunched down slightly embarrassed by her clumsy maneuver.

“I don’t usually ride...” She blushed sheepishly. “But I should be fine getting to the outpost. We’ll meet you at the castle as soon as possible.” She yanked on the reigns, startling her horse for

moment before regaining control.

“Just be careful...” I felt a little uneasy as she struggled to tame her mare, but she regained her balance without too much trouble.

“That goes for you, too.” She gave me a playful smile. “Good luck, Arabella.” She turned her mare and shot off into the woods at a full gallop. I was rather impressed at how quickly she managed to overcome her stumble. I turned to the cobble path to set off on my journey, then turned my head back to my friends who were waiting to send me off.

“See you soon.” I tried to sound brave before turning down the path at a gallop. My body was beginning to feel stiff from all the aching and fever, so I was growing worried about how much longer I would be able to stay upright. Without testing how long that would be, I took full advantage of Saffron’s speed. The beautiful mare raced through the woods with the smoothest of gallops and I couldn’t help but feel thankful that the creature was so skilled. Any more jostling and I would have been sick from the motion.

I had never paid attention to the road when I was first left in this portion of the kingdom, but I knew the capital was to the east. I followed the paths that kept me in the general direction and veered off the road when they began to turn elsewhere. After a while, Saffron’s gallop slowed to trot so she could catch her breath. I let her go at her own pace but was starting to grow concerned about my own stamina. My fingertips were growing numb, and my left hand would hardly move whenever I tried stretching it out. This couldn’t be good...

The roads began to shift from dirt to cobblestone after about an hour of riding. I looked up through the trees and saw the familiar streets of the Isalla capital. The castle walls were directly in view, and I thought I could cry at the sight. I kept pushing onward, whispering apologies to Saffron along the way, as well as murmured promises of apples upon our arrival. The streets were far more crowded than the forest paths, so I had to slow my pace quite a bit. I held my head down with my hood pulled low to avoid any unexpected attention. Thankfully, the worn cloak was long enough to cover the bold red gown Aurelia had lent me. The dress might have been a little too attention-grabbing than what would have been necessary.

My left hand completely failed me as I drew near the castle gates. I watched in horror as it fell limply off the reins, and my fingers crumpled up as if they were lifeless. My right hand had begun to grow stiff, and my head was aching bad enough that I was struggling to keep my balance. Desperately, I pushed through the crowded streets, trying with all my might to go even an inch farther. The closer I drew to the castle, the denser the crowds became. It felt like the castle was moving backward as I was moving forward. After a few more steps, I decided I couldn’t risk riding for fear of falling off due to my growing numbness and vertigo. I half-climbed, half-fell off Saffron, drawing a couple of odd stares in my direction.

Stumbling to my feet, I clumsily grasped at the reigns, consistently failing. My right hand had gone stiff, so I linked my arm through the reign and awkwardly lead Saffron with my elbow. My steps had become sluggish, and I found myself leaning on the mare to keep upright. People were beginning to stare, but I wasn’t going to stop to take much notice. Despite the never-ending crowd, I managed to trudge forward until the gates were merely feet in front of me. I couldn’t feel my toes by the time I stood before the cast iron gates. The two front guards looked at me suspiciously as I leaned heavily on Saffron, trying to catch my breath. After a few moments of deep breathing, I stood to my full height and pulled my hood down.

“I am Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria of Isalla.” I watched as the two men’s jaws fell wide open. “Let me pass and fetch the servant Earl at once. Do not alert anyone of my arrival and send for

the man discreetly.” My words and expression were strong, but my legs shook. The men clearly looked panicked, but instantly rushed into action.

“Yes, Your Highness right away.” The shorter guard saluted nervously, then sprinted off toward the castle. The second guard, still stunned, continued to eye me.

“You,” I attempted to point at him, but only managed to fling my arm in his direction, “I need you to tend to my horse. She is need of water and rest, so please see that she is well cared for.” The man snapped out of his daze and rushed forward to take Saffron. “Oh and give her some apples,” I added with a serious tone. The guard gave me a puzzled look but straightened into submission at my deathly serious glare.

“Right away, Your Highness.” The man bowed before turning toward the stable. Once they were both gone, I rested my full weight against the metal gate. My chest rose and fell aggressively as my breaths became more labored. I needed to sit, but I wasn’t certain I would be able to get up if I did. I rested my head against the metal, trying to lessen the faintness when I heard two sets of footsteps approach. Lifting my head, I saw the guard from earlier rush forward with Earl the butler. My heart swelled with joy when I recognized his salt and pepper hair. I stood back up as the gate swung open, and the man wrapped me into a full embrace.

“Your Highness...” He hugged me warmly and I wanted to squeeze him back, but my arms weren’t obeying me, “we have all been worried sick about you. I was starting to fear the worst.” Earl pulled back to face me, and I saw tears well up in his eyes. I felt the desire to cry too, but I swallowed them back.

“Earl, I desperately need your help.” I looked at him intensely and he snapped to attention.

“How may I be of service, princess?” His voice turned icy with seriousness. I was relieved that he grasped the gravity of my situation so quickly.

“I need you to bring me to my mother immediately, but I cannot be spotted by anyone else.” I leaned forward and held his gaze. “Especially not King Garrett or any of his men.” I leaned back and watched as he worked through my request. His eyes widened in shock before he nodded in agreement.

“Absolutely. Please follow me closely.” I followed him through the servant’s entrance, weaving through the different halls while avoiding any passing servants. I knew I could trust Earl to get me to the queen unnoticed. He knew everyone’s schedule better than they did, so I didn’t fear we would run into anyone. If I could just get to my mother, I could explain what was going on and ask her to help retrieve a remedy from King Garrett. I would have a better chance of getting the elixir if the queen asked him than if I tried myself. Besides, I need to warn her about her betrothed.

Earl noticed fairly quickly that I wasn’t in good shape and allowed me to lean on him for support as we dashed between the halls. After what felt like an eternity, we finally rounded the corner and stood in front of the grand oak doors to the queen’s suite. I stared at the doors reminiscently as I recalled the last time I had stepped through them. My foolish and childish self had pulled a cruel joke on my mother, but now I had a chance to make up for it all. She deserved better than how I had treated her, as both my queen and my mom.

“She is having tea with the king in a half hour,” Earl explained in a hushed tone while bracing me against the wall. “She should be getting ready about now. Her dressing maids were not called to assist her so she should be alone.” He lightly rapped his knuckles on the door, attempting to keep the echo low.

For a moment no other sounds were heard until light footsteps became more and more audible. Queen Minerva swung the doors open in a fluid motion with an annoyed expression across her face. She wore a deep purple silk gown with her blonde hair braided up around her silver crown. If I were

to guess, we had just interrupted her make-up touch-ups because her lips were bright red, but her eyes remained completely bare. She first scowled at Earl before tracing her gaze to where I leaned heavily against the doorpost. Her irritated grimace switched to pure shock when she finally caught my eyes. She placed a hand over her mouth as tears streamed down her face she embraced.

“Oh, my dear girl!” She squeezed me so tightly, I was starting to see stars. She pulled back and placed a hand to my cheek. “Where have you been? We have been searching all over the kingdom for you.” She checked me over and seemed to notice my ill state. “Arabella, what’s wrong? You look awful. Earl, please fetch the royal physician at once!” She turned to the butler, but I cut her off before he could leave.

“No!” I whisper-shouted, trying not to cause any further alarm. “No one but you and Earl know I am here, and it needs to stay that way for a little while longer. Please, Mother, I have much I need to tell you, and I need your help if I am to get well.” I looked to her pleadingly, and her expression remained stunned but quickly softened.

“Alright, dear.” She supported my arm and led me into her room. “Earl, please inform the king that I might be late to tea. If he requires an explanation, tell him that I’m recovering from a headache. Just be certain to keep the princess’s return a secret until further notice.” She urged the butler onward, who bowed before leaving to deliver his message. I sighed in relief at my mother’s understanding. Hopefully, she would be just as much so to the news about the king. She assisted me toward her four-post bed and laid me upon it. I removed my cloak, feeling entirely overheated.

“Arabella, please...” she sat on the bed beside me and looked upon my face with concern, “tell me what happened?”

chapter seventeen

“King Garrett tried to kill me,” I answered flatly as I sunk into the plush mattress, instantly easing some of my aches. My wrists and ankles had now succumbed to the spreading paralysis, so I decided to get straight to the point. “I was tricked out of the castle by a Draconian assassin. He hunted me for days, so I had to hide in a laundry mill, but the king must have found out I was still alive because he sent a poison. I was exposed to it for over a week before I realized what was happening. He has been indirectly poisoning the soldiers from the western battalion as well. He is only marrying you to conquer Isalla, and he will kill you next.” I gasped from my breathy explanation. My lungs burned as I sucked in air and stirred a round of coughing from my chest. I looked up to my mother, whose face was contorted with a mixture of emotions.

She stood slowly from my side and began to walk around the room with her hand on her chin. I watched as her shock processed and she began to develop the words she needed.

“Is that why you are so sick?” She looked to me with wide eyes, “Are you poisoned?” She rushed back to my side and kneeled by the bed.

“Yes, Mother.” A tear welled up in my eyes as I looked to my mother for comfort. “A sample of the poison is in my cloak. I believe King Garret also processed an antidote for it since I saw it used on the other mill maids. I was doused in the poison before I left so I need you to find where he would have made such an antidote or else...” I bit my lip as it quivered. The reality of me dying wasn’t too far away. My only hope was that my mother could retrieve an antidote before it was too late.

Mother dug through my cloak pocket and found the poisoned soap. She looked it over intently before running into her washroom. I wasn’t sure what she was doing until she ran out with a handheld basin of water and a rag. She placed the water on the floor and began to roll up my sleeves.

“I’m not leaving you until I have at least rinsed the poison off.” She dipped her rag into the water and scrubbed my arm. My skin was growing paler by the minute as I began to look as white as the snow on the ground.

“Mother, it’s no use...” I tried to explain, but she kept wiping my skin frantically. “My friends already removed what they could. The rest has already entered my bloodstream by now.” I looked at her determined face with tears blurring my vision. All my life I wished for my mother to care for me, and here I was, getting my wish as I lay on what may be my death bed. My arms were too stiff to attempt to wipe at my eyes, so I just allowed the tears to falls.

“Oh, darling, don’t cry.” She raised the rag to my cheeks and wiped them for me. The action made my blood freeze and my heart stop beating. “It will all be over soon, sweetheart.” She smiled at me, but I felt a new kind of sick.

Apples...

Why did her rag smell like apples...?

“Mother...” I spoke the word cautiously. Terror seared through my body as she continued to wipe my forehead with a smile. “Mother, what are you doing?” My voice came out broken and raspy with horror. She smiled a little wider at my apparent fear and proceeded to wipe down my other arm.

“Oh, Arabella darling,” she taunted as she calmly spread the liquid across my skin, “you were never the brightest when it came to foreign affairs.” She placed the rag back inside the basin and wiped her hands on a dry towel. “I mean, King Garrett really? The old man can barely stomach watching a duel. Did you really think he was behind any of this?” She smiled with her perfect white

teeth as she screwed the lid back onto the soap bottle.

“Why, Mother?” I rasped with a broken heart. My entire body was stiff to the point where I could barely turn my neck to look at her let alone call for help. “What have I done to deserve this?” My throat constricted around my words, choking out the sound.

“Is that some sort of joke?” She laughed maniacally, spinning with a new fury in her blue eyes. “You’re such a foolish child, always have been. Your father spoiled you so rotten that you believed you could do whatever you wanted, no matter whom it affected!” she spat, leaning toward my eyes so I could get a full view of her anger.

“You and your ridiculous excuse for a pretty face have lured away every man that I even dreamed of marrying! Ever since your father died, I have spent years trying to capture the heart of another man so this kingdom could be well-protected again. But you and your childish games scared away every possible suitor. You wouldn’t even marry for yourself! You made it your personal goal to drive Isalla to its weakest point in centuries.” She was fuming, but I could tell she wasn’t done.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I questioned weakly, trying to piece together how this was a strong enough reason for her to murder her own daughter. “I could have listened... I could have helped.”

“You’re wrong!” she shouted, slamming her hands on the bedspread. “Your selfish heart never helped a single soul other than yourself. When I heard that Prince Jasper was arriving to propose, I knew I had to do something or Isalla would be doomed to live under your idiotic rule!” She began to laugh madly as I cried. It hurt to hear that my mother felt I was destined to doom our kingdom. Was she right? Had I really been that selfish before?

“But you’re my daughter,” she sneered as she narrowed her eyes, “and I couldn’t get rid of you without risking being blamed for treason.” Her sickening smile graced her perfect red lips as she turned her back to me. “Luckily, someone did it for me.” She walked over to her vanity and sat in front of the mirror.

“Wh- what are you talking about?” I stuttered. My throat was getting tighter, and my breaths were increasing in difficulty.

“Oh? The Draconian assassin you mentioned...?” she asked coyly as she resumed applying her makeup. “I had nothing to do with him. As a matter of fact, I tried to hire the man to find you. He’s actually not from Drancos at all. He’s from Ashbourne. I’m not sure who he is exactly as he gave himself the silly name of “mirror,” but he promised he could find you. It wasn’t until after he told me your hiding spot that I decided I could do away with you slowly.” She puckered her lips and applied a fresh layer of lipstick.

“He’s not from Drancos?” I gasped wondering which sentence would be my last. My head was throbbing viscusly, and my chest was tightening from paralysis.

“Keep up, darling, I already said that part,” she mocked as she dusted powder on her cheeks. “When I asked him to kill you, he told me he was on strict orders to keep you alive for the meantime. Obviously, I didn’t want to risk you making it home before the job was done, so I took matters into my own hands.” She dotted a fake dimple below the corner of her eye. “The Wilson fellow... Dwarfer was it? He was so easily bought. All I had to do was send some gold and provide a few antidotes in case his staff got sick. I couldn’t necessarily destroy the man’s business after he did me such a favor. As for the enchanter who crafted the poison and the remedies... Well, he’s probably back in the Sybetail kingdom by now.” She applied one more puff of powder to her face before she stood to view her full ensemble.

Astounded, I stared at her for a few quiet moments. How could she have done such a thing with no remorse? My heart wrenched as I looked at the monster I had called my mother just moments

before. She had known where I was. Known that I was in trouble, yet instead of sending help, she sent soap.

“Why did the assassin lie to me?” I asked through a painful glare. “If he was from Ashbourne why did he say Drancos? And why did he keep me alive?” My lips trembled from stiffness as I formed the words.

“I’m not quite sure,” she said nonchalantly as she spun in front of the mirror. “He was rather vague about everything and didn’t want to open up about his true intentions. However, he didn’t seem to bear any ill will toward me, so I allowed him to keep his secrets. Perhaps the Ashbourne king wanted you dead as well. I suppose I will be doing him a favor if that is the case.” She chuckled as I struggled to wrap my head around it all.

Was King Darius involved in this too?

“What about King Garrett—” A coughing fit cut me off, and I wheezed painfully, trying to catch my breath. “Does he know about this?” I settled my lungs, trying to hang onto consciousness long enough to get the full story. If I was going to die, I at least didn’t want to die not knowing the full truth.

“Oh, of course not.” She waved her hand dismissively, then began to fiddle with her golden hair. “King Garrett is a complete walkover. His son is rather nice... you would have liked him, but neither have the guts that your father did. Isalla used to be strong and ruthless, so I’m just taking a new approach to strength. Drancos may not be vicious, but they are prosperous in trade. Once you control the trade, you control the power, and our joined kingdoms shall become the strongest in the entire Emerald Realm.” She strode across the room, pompously raising her chin high at the image.

“So, you see darling,” she directed her icy gaze to me, “your sacrifice is necessary for the good of the kingdom. Sure, you could have married Prince Jasper, but we all knew you wouldn’t have gone through with it being the spoiled brat that you are. This was our kingdom’s only hope to truly set itself apart from the rest.” She chuckled triumphantly at her victory. “Now all I have to do is let you perish, and then make a glorious display of woe at your unfortunate demise. Who would have guessed that a group of mill maids and their owner could kidnap and poison a princess as an act of rebellion toward the crown?” She shrugged bemusedly at her story as anger built inside of me.

“Don’t,” I stated boldly. My voice rang clearer than it had this entire time and my fury dripped venomously. “Don’t get them involved.” I stared daggers into the queen’s startled blue eyes, and she froze momentarily before laughing again.

“Oh, darling, you should really see yourself,” she snorted. “You almost sounded like you care about *common street trash*.” She continued laughing, and I begged my body to move so I could slap her. Unfortunately, all I could manage was some furious writhing that hardly shifted me.

“They had nothing to do with this!” I tried to yell, but my voice squeaked into an angered whisper. “The soldiers too... You have been poisoning their uniforms with the same soap you sent to kill me!” I seethed as she merely raised an eyebrow at my outburst.

“They’re only soldiers.” She waved as if their lives were that dismissible. “They knew what the risks were when they signed up for the job. It isn’t my fault that a few got caught in the cross fire.” She spoke coolly as she leaned to slide on her formal slippers. I wanted to poison her myself. “Unfortunately, I might need to have Earl killed as well. It’s a shame you had to get him involved in all this. Good help can be so hard to find.” She sighed half-heartedly and I felt my heart drop. This couldn’t be happening. I wished I could stand so I could put an end to all this and save my friends. She couldn’t do this to them.

“You’re despicable,” I huffed under my fading breath.

“And you’re my daughter,” she said sweetly as she gave me a corrupted smile. “So what does that make you?”

“Not you,” I hissed softly. “I will never be like you.”

“That’s right darling,” she leaned in close like a viper and a wicked gleam shone in her eyes, “because you won’t live long enough to even try.” She let out a satisfied cackle as she turned to leave the room. “Sweet dreams, Arabella dear.” She opened the tall oak door before she whispered. “And long live Isalla.” She then shut the door with a loud echo, leaving me alone in the empty room.

I lay completely motionless on the bed, unable to even rotate my neck to gaze around the room. My head rested in the center of the feather pillow, staring directly up at the ceiling. The paralysis was slowly infecting my lungs, and I could feel them strain to fill. I wanted to scream or cry, but neither was possible anymore. All I could do was stare at the top of the canopy bed and let my thoughts be my last form of company before I slipped away.

Why had I never seen this coming? My mother and father were so different, yet they were more alike than I had ever before recognized. When King Victor ruled, he saw everyone as a piece in an overarching game. When their usefulness expired, he would toss them aside—a trick my mother clearly picked up from him. Had I not been born beautiful, would he have discarded me as well? It began to dawn on me that his spoiled affection toward me may have been nothing more than the grooming of his showpiece, another flaunt of his power. Now that he was gone, it shouldn’t be a surprise that I outlived my purpose in my mother’s eyes. This was how it was going to end, with the Isallan royals doing what they do best... removing the weak to enhance the strong. It was sick.

My heart sank low. I closed my eyes and pictured the faces of the people I would miss the most. I thought of Hazel’s brilliant smile, Daniela’s comforting eyes, and Delilah’s quirkiness. I imagined Sylvia’s comforting voice, Susan’s hysterical snoring, and Bethanne’s loud gossip. Consciousness began to slip away as I longed for Glenda’s stern scolding and Aurelia’s warm generosity. As my awareness finally faded away, I thought of Peter. I dreamed of his perfect face and striking green eyes. My body felt warm as it had the day he caught me in the woods, and I felt safe as I had when he gave me the whistle for protection.

The whistle.

I creaked an eye open, fighting for a moment more of strength. The instrument had shifted from my movement on the bed and rested on my chest, facing toward my chin. The tiny sliver of metal was nearly invisible tucked into a ruffle on my bodice. With my last ounce of will, I tilted my chin down and picked up the whistle with my lips. I took the largest breath I could manage with my ailing lungs and blew into the metal, making the sweetest sound I had ever heard.

Then my head fell back, and I was gone.

chapter eighteen

One hour earlier...

“Peter! There you are!” I turned my head around and saw Lady Lockly riding up to me with haste. She was calling my name with desperation in her voice, so I left my men and ran to her. “Oh, Peter, where have you been!?” she cried as she dismounted her mare. She stopped in front of me, catching her breath for a moment.

“Lady Lockly, what are you doing here?” I questioned nervously. She should have been with Arabella by now. “I was going to meet up with you at the laundry mill along with...” I halted before saying the princess’s real name.

Maybe she hadn’t told her yet.

“With Arabella,” she filled in without hesitation. “She told me everything, but something terrible happened.” Her eyes filled with terror and my instincts took over.

“What happened? Where is she?” I grabbed the girl by the shoulders, making her jump at the impact. Noticing her fright, I released my grip from her, still pleading with my eyes for answers.

I stood as stiff as a statue as the lady filled me in on the transgressions with Mr. Dwarfer. My fists tightened into balls as I listened to her story unfold. That imbecile had the nerve to poison his own princess? Not to even mention my men. My brain slipped into strategic thinking as I attempted to piece together what his motives would have been, or more specifically, the motives of his employer.

“Arabella already left for the castle?” I broke the silence, no longer able to withhold my questioning.

“Yes,” she confirmed anxiously. “She was in really bad shape, if I’m honest. Her best hope at recovery was getting a cure elixir. The castle may be the only place she can find one now.” She shook her head in despair, trying to remain brave. “She went to seek out the queen. At the very least, she wanted to warn her of the man she was marrying. We waited as long as we could for you, but you never came. Where have you been?” Her round blue eyes reflected frustration and panic.

I took a calming breath. “The prisoner escaped,” I admitted in defeat. The girl gasped, smacking a hand over her mouth in shock. “I was on my way to meet you both when I was alerted of his getaway. He badly injured one of my men in the process and fled into the woods. I have been trying to deal with the aftermath ever since.” I pressed a hand to my forehead in aggravation.

“That’s terrible,” the lady acknowledged drearily. “Did you even get the letter from him?” She looked up to me with hope, and I was relieved that I could offer her some. I withdrew a folded piece of parchment from my jacket and showed it to her.

“Fortunately, yes.” I watched as her eyes grew wide in achievement. “I was going to bring it to Arabella until...” I sighed and rolled my eyes. That beast was going to get skinned the next time I laid eyes on him. “Anyway, that’s unimportant now. We need to leave for the castle at once.” I switched my focus to Arabella. She needed me and I hadn’t been there, but I won’t make her wait a moment more. I mounted my stallion as Lady Lockly climbed onto her own mount. She gave me a confident nod before she turned her horse down the path at full speed. I followed closely behind, hoping to make up for lost time...

The journey was a quick one since both of our horses maintained an even stamina. When we arrived at the castle gates, I nearly flew off my horse before landing smoothly on the cobble ground with a thump. The lady took a little longer to dismount in her full skirt, but I wasn’t feeling patient. I raced up to the posted guard, causing the man to face me aggressively.

“Halt!” the stout man commanded sternly. “No one enters the castle grounds without adequate rank or formal invitation.” He held his sword at the ready while the second guard eyed me intently.

“I am Captain Peter Williamson of the western royal battalion.” I glared at him fearlessly as I put the man in his place. “I request an immediate audience with the queen in regards to an urgent emergency.” I watched as the man’s expression changed into severity. He looked at his companion, who nodded aggressively.

“You may enter,” the second man stated as he opened the gates. “We shall inform the queen of your arrival at once.” The shorter man scurried off while a sudden third guard led me hastily through the gardens and up the castle steps. Lady Lockly followed at my heels with a determined expression plastered to her face.

Once we were inside, we were directed to a small receiving room where tea and biscuits were promptly served. I paced around the space, anxious to speak to someone other than a serving maid. I didn’t have time for a cup of tea while I knew Arabella was here somewhere. I watched as Miss Aurelia sat nervously in her seat, twisting bunches of her skirt fabric in her hands. The wait was killing us both.

“That’s it,” I finally announced, turning toward the doorway we had been led through. “I’m going to look for the princess. If the maids return, tell them I left for the washroom.” I began to make my way toward the exit, not wanting to waste time on the young girl’s attempts to stop me.

“Peter wait...” She stood from her chair and locked eyes with mine. She displayed far more courage than fear. “Good luck.” She gave me an awkward salute of approval, and I smiled at her in understanding. She knew what was at stake, and I appreciated her willingness to do what was necessary.

I snuck through the halls as stealthily as possible. This was only my third time ever being in the castle, so I had a slight semblance of direction, but not an astounding one. I passed by multiple sitting rooms, a library, and the kitchen, but couldn’t find any sign of Arabella or the queen. Finally, I rounded the corner into an ornate parlor where I was graced by the eyes of not one but two royals.

It was King Garrett and Prince Jasper.

I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword out of pure instinct. These two men had brought so much hurt into Arabella’s life, and now she may be dying because of it. The king’s dark brown eyes looked up to me in confusion. He stood clumsily from his seat so he could turn to face me.

“Good afternoon, good sir,” the king greeted me warmly with a kind smile. “You appear to be in a hurry. May my son and I be of any service to you?” The young prince stood, matching his father’s cheerful smile. It made me sick seeing them so happy after knowing what they were capable of.

“Yes, I actually could use some assistance.” My tone was as cold as ice and my eyes dug into theirs, causing the king’s friendly smile to fade. “I’m looking for an antidote to a magical poison. Something tells me you are familiar with such items.” I stepped toward the royals menacingly, watching their kind faces slip into fright.

Good, be scared.

“I’m afraid I don’t know of any such antidotes.” The king took an involuntary step back at my advancements, and the prince stepped forward in defense for his father.

“Who are you to demand such a thing from my father?” Prince Jasper spoke boldly, trying to intimidate me with his bravery. Unfazed by his useless bravado, I pursued further. He was a fool to think I could be stopped now.

“I am the captain who has been protecting Princess Arabella from a Draconian assassin ever since her disappearance.” I drew my sword and directed it toward the king. My eyes burned with

fury, but the king looked more astounded than afraid. “While she was hiding, someone had been slowly sending her poison, along with antidotes for those who were affected around her. I have come to retrieve another cure and am prepared to go to any lengths necessary to find it.” I stepped closer to the king preparing to listen to his denials, but he remained silent. Both of their faces wore puzzled looks before King Garrett broke the silence.

“Captain,” the king began in a clear voice, “I swear to you on my kingdom that I know nothing of this.” He gazed over to his son, who wore the same befuddled look.

“Neither do I,” the prince confessed, looking back toward me. I wanted to be angry at them for lying, but they looked genuinely lost.

“You said you were guarding the princess,” the king stated with growing concern in his eyes. “Do you know where she is now?” His voice held the same worry as that of a father. He didn’t sound like a killer at all. Was this all an act? I lowered my sword cautiously as I searched their eyes for answers. No matter how much I looked, I couldn’t find a shred of deceit.

It was then that I noticed his signet ring. It was extremely detailed with floral patterns and a letter “D” encrusted in the middle for Drancos. The more I stared at it, the more I was reminded that it bore no resemblance to the seal from the note the assassin had carried. Sure, he could have used a different seal, but it just seemed like such a specific detail to be mindful of. Either this man was a full-blown mastermind or he wasn’t the villain at all.

I took a deep breath. “She should be in the castle somewhere,” I confessed. The soldier in me told me to keep her whereabouts a secret, but the man behind the sword wanted to trust them. I risked letting my guard down. Arabella needed help as soon as possible. “She went to meet with the queen, but I haven’t located either of them.” I let out an exasperated sigh as the king rubbed his light-colored beard in thought.

“The queen was meant to meet with me for tea, but I was informed that she may be running late.” His eyes met mine in revelation. “Perhaps the princess has already found her? Did you say she was in need of medical attention?” His worry was apparent all over his face.

“Yes, urgently.” I explained hastily what I knew about poison, and how it had affected my men. After describing how my magic could only lessen the symptoms and slow the poison’s developments, the prince chirped in.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Prince Jasper interrupted with an inquisitive look on his face. “What means of physical contact did you use when attempting to heal the victims of the poison?” He leaned forward in interest, and I couldn’t help but wonder how this was applicable.

“Usually through touching hands,” I clipped, hoping to move on to the more important task of saving the princess. I turned back to the king, but Jasper spoke up again.

“That must be it then!” He jumped slightly, causing me to whirl back around at him. “I’m a scholar of sorts, you see, and I have spent quite a bit of time researching magic. A caster who possesses the gift of healing is often most effective when their magical energy is passed through the direct pathway of illness.” He smiled proudly, but I just raised an eyebrow at his random factoid.

“I’m not sure I follow...” I was growing irritated at his aloofness. “Are you saying I have been healing incorrectly?” I watched as the king devoted his full attention to his son with an impressed reaction.

“For this particular ailment, perhaps,” the prince continued. “From what it sounds like, this poison mainly affects the nervous and respiratory system. You said your men experienced numbness and shortness of breath, correct? Well, in that case, directing magic through their palms would dilute the energy’s effect by the time it reached their nervous system and lungs. If you directed your healing

into the lungs and brain, then your magic may be the only cure necessary.” He looked up to me for some sign of my understanding, but I remained dumbfounded for the moment.

How had I not realized this myself? This entire time I thought my magic was too weak, when in reality it was just misdirected.

“Thank you.” I bowed to the prince in gratitude, and he gave me a friendly smile in return. “If you’ll excuse me, I must find the princess at once. I promise to speak with you in more thorough detail after she is safe.” I offered a bow toward the king as well, who shooed me to leave.

“Yes, of course. Now please, hurry.” He ushered me while simultaneously calling for a servant to assist in the search. I ran at full speed toward the door when I was forced to skid to a stop. A startled cry held me in my tracks as I followed my gaze up a long purple gown to the face of the queen.

“Oh goodness, it’s you captain.” The queen placed a hand to her chest as she caught her breath from the spook. “I was just on my way to speak with you after apologizing to the king for my absence.” She smiled sweetly up at the man who gave her a polite nod. Her face grew puzzled at his stoic greeting. “Garrett, dear, is everything alright?” She walked past me gracefully and crossed the room toward her fiancée. “You look as if you have seen a ghost.” She pressed her arms to his chest in a flirtatious manner, causing Jasper to look away with a discreet eye roll.

“My dear queen,” the king began in a solemn tone while removing her hands from his chest, “has the princess found you yet?” He held her hands in his while looking at her hopefully. He was trying to be sensitive toward the topic, but the queen merely cocked her head in confusion.

“Well, no, of course not,” she replied plainly with an innocent expression. “The dear girl is still missing. I’m sad to say that not even I have heard any news on her disappearance.” She muffled an impending sob, but quickly pulled herself back together like a dignified queen. “Why? Have you heard something?” Her eyes widened in what I assumed to be a hopeful expression, but there was something else there that I couldn’t quite pinpoint.

“The princess left for the castle no more than an hour ago,” I announced while stepping forward to establish my presence in the conversation. “She has been badly poisoned and rushed here in search of an antidote, but I know now that I can heal her once found.” I lifted my cap and bowed respectfully, intentionally flashing my silver streak of hair as proof to my claims. The queen’s expression became aghast at the information and my small hat trick. She looked overwhelmed with emotion then fell back into a plush chair.

“My poor Arabella.” She cried lightly into her palms and the king offered her a handkerchief. At the sound of her cries, a few servants cascaded into the room to ensure she was alright or if she was in need of attendance. “I wish I could tell you,” she continued while delicately wiping at a tear, “but I haven’t seen any sign of her. If she’s in the castle, then I don’t know where.” She let out another dramatic sob when suddenly, a servant stepped out from the shadows. The man had salt and pepper hair and was most likely a butler or other high-ranked servant based on his embellished uniform.

“Pardon my impudence,” the servant bowed low, fully missing a deathly glare shot by the queen, who did not seem pleased by his interjection. “but, Your Majesty, I must insist that you confide in these men. I am well-aware of the known risks. However, the captain has stated that he may be able to heal the princess from her ailment. We should bring him to her at once if there is a chance of her recovery.” He spoke boldly as he rose from his bow. The queen’s face said nothing at first. Was this man confirming that Arabella was here? My heart rate began to increase with the hope of finding her.

“Earl, I am not sure what you’re implying,” the queen finally said with a confused tone. “Princess Arabella is still missing. She hasn’t been heard from in weeks.” She glared at the man with

irritation as if he had been foolish to forget. The servant's face was just as puzzled, and I was beginning to wonder if the older man had memory issues. Disappointment filled my heart at the false hope.

"My queen," the man began again in a much more pointed tone, "I just led the princess to your suite not even thirty minutes ago." His eyebrows furrowed and he courageously took a step forward. A sudden unease flooded me. The queen looked unshaken, but something wasn't right.

"Your poor memory must be failing you." The queen shrugged nonchalantly. "I have been alone all evening." A bead of sweat dripped down her forehead, and my sights zeroed in on it.

Without hesitation, I drew my sword and pointed it at her throat. "You're a good liar," I hissed furiously, "but not a perfect one. Where is she?" My blood boiled with rage at her blatant lies. She was keeping me from healing Arabella, and that made her a traitor in my eyes. The queen looked stunned by my sudden aggression, but the king and prince only stood by watching.

"She's not here!" she cried in despair, clearly frightened by my blade. "I swear to you, I haven't seen her!" Her voice cracked and shook, no longer able to lie smoothly. I leaned closer, prepared to threaten her until she admitted the truth when a shrill sound pierced through the air.

A whistle.

The sound was barely audible, but I recognized it in an instant. It was the signal whistle I had given to Arabella. She was here and she needed me.

Without another word, I sheathed my sword and ran toward the sound. The shrill note only lasted a few seconds, but I knew that it came from upstairs. I sprinted through the grand halls of the castle, never breaking stride. My lungs burned from the dash as I desperately ran through the halls toward where I imagined the queen's suite would be. Before long, I found the tall oak doors from which the sound seemed to have emitted. Without hesitation I burst through the door and ran into the lavish suite.

I saw her instantly.

Princess Arabella rested peacefully in the middle of the queen's grand bed. Fear and anguish tore through me as I saw her closed eyes and stiff body. I approached tentatively, terrified of what I would find. She was beautiful; her skin was so pale it was nearly white, but even in sickness, her beauty was unmatched. Her elegant red dress brought out the red in her lips, making her look almost like a porcelain doll. I brushed a strand of dark hair away from her delicate features as I pushed away my grief.

Was I too late?

"Don't leave me, Arabella," I whispered as I pulled a dagger from my boot.

I held the blade gently under her nose to check for the condensation of breath. My blood froze as nothing appeared for a few moments until an extremely slight fog frosted the metal. She was still alive, but barely.

Without wasting another moment, I pressed my left hand to her forehead and focused on her nervous system. The warmth of my magic filled my veins as I guided my magic through her nerves, trying to remove the effects of the poison. I could feel as my magic eradicated every ounce of toxin, slowly returning the blood flow to her limbs. My body heated from the power I radiated, but I ignored the heat. The only heat I cared about was the warmth returning to Arabella's forehead. Life flooded back into her skin as the paleness faded into a more natural glow. I wanted to cheer for joy, but something still wasn't right. Her lungs remained still, and her skin was turning a slight tinge of blue.

Her respiratory system was still failing.

I cupped my hand on her cheek before I knelt beside her. My heart pounded, but I knew

what I needed to do. Lightly, I pressed my forehead against hers and whispered quietly, “stay with me, Arabella.” I leaned back and gazed upon her rose-red lips.

And then, I kissed her.

chapter nineteen

Life flooded into my lungs as a sudden rush of air raised my chest. I felt my pain melt away as the restrictions that had limited my breathing broke away with ease. Alongside the warmth of my flowing blood, I felt a soft warm pressure upon my lips. The feeling was sweet and comforting. As it gently faded, my eyes fluttered open, and I saw Peter. He was so close to me; his eyes fixed on mine with a smile of elated relief spreading across his lips. My beating heart swelled with joy as my own smile formed. He was here; I wasn't dreaming. I rose slowly from the bed, gently easing myself into a sitting position. My skirts crinkled audibly as I wiggled my toes underneath the fabric.

"Peter?" I spoke his name gently, testing my voice. It came out smooth and clear, with no discomfort. "You saved me. How did you find an antidote?" I gazed into his perfect jade eyes as they sparkled with relief. He looked at me as if I was the most precious thing in the realms, and it made me want to wrap my arms around him.

He picked up my hand and stroked the back of it gently. "Arabella," his voice was slightly broken up from strain, "I thought you were gone..." He squeezed my hand and held my eyes with a longing gaze. "I thought that I had lost you..." I felt a flutter in my chest and wrapped him in an embrace. His broad shoulders encased mine as he eagerly accepted the hold.

"I thought I was gone, too," I admitted as he squeezed me tightly. "But as I faded away, I kept thinking of everyone I loved and how badly I didn't want to leave them." I pulled away slightly so I could look into his eyes. "I kept thinking of you." I anxiously watched as his eyes widened and smiled the biggest grin I had ever seen.

"I will always come to your rescue my princess," he said sweetly as he raised my hand to his lips, "my Arabella." He placed a light kiss upon my hand, and I couldn't hold back any more.

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close for a gentle kiss.

The sudden sound of the large oak doors slamming open startled us apart. We tore away from each other, a little embarrassed as an entire herd of people dashed into the room. Aurelia, Earl and all seven girls from the mill flooded into the suite at full speed.

"You're alright!" Aurelia exclaimed as she sprinted toward the bed and pulled me into a hug. The impact knocked the wind out of me for a moment, but it was nothing compared to what came next. All seven mill maids and even Earl ambushed me into a massive embrace.

"I'm so happy you're not dead!" Hazel mumbled somewhere through the mass of bodies. "Those mean old guards out front wouldn't let us in! Aurelia had to come talk them down." The cluster began to slowly fall back, allowing me to take in my first full breath since the affections started.

"Glad yer still kickin' missy." Glenda's lips spread into the smallest of smiles, and I thought for a moment that maybe I had died after all. "Princess or not, you'll always have this rowdy bunch to back you." She gave me a small wink as the other girls smiled in agreement.

"Thank you all," I murmured through withheld tears of joy. "You have all treated me like family, and I'm so grateful to have found you." I rubbed at my eyes before recalling the events that had created this happy reunion. "Oh, and speaking of family..." I turned to Earl and Peter.

"We are aware of the queen's treason," Earl said coldly. His eyes held an anger that I had never seen before in the kind man. "She has been detained both by the Isallan and Draconian guard until a proper trial can be held."

Peter stepped forward, removing something from his interior pocket. "They might want to take

a look at this as well.” He held out a piece of parchment that I assumed was the letter of confession from the assassin. “Though I’m starting to believe it’s only full of lies. The Draconian king and prince assisted in saving you. They even gave me the vital information I required on how to heal you. I don’t understand why the king would have sent an assassin just to save you.” His conflicted thoughts were broken up by the sound of another figure entering the crowded suite.

“Well, that would be because I didn’t.” King Garret’s voice echoed off the polished floors and the entire party split apart, allowing him to approach. “I am relieved to see you are looking well, Your Highness.” He gave me a respectful bow, and I lowered my head in return.

“I am well, and it sounds as though I have you to thank for it.” I smiled graciously, and the old king’s eyes twinkled. “Please forgive me for my questioning, but are you claiming that you had no correlation with this man or his plotting?” I gestured for Peter to pass the letter to the king.

He took it calmly then spent a few moments reading it over. “None at all,” the king confirmed in a stern tone. “I must say, this is deplorable that a rogue would drag the good name of Drancos through the mud. I swear to you on the kingdom of Drancos that I have never had any contact with a hired assassin or acted in any ill manner toward the kingdom of Isalla.” He held my eyes as he swore with his hand over his heart. “Let all of you here be witness to my claim and hold me accountable should my oath be proven false.” He lowered his hand and gave me a friendly smile.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood to face him. My legs wobbled at first, but Peter helped steady me from behind. “I trust your words. My mother actually confessed that the man reigned from Ashbourne.” A multitude of eyes closed in on me with rapt interest. I explained everything that the queen had confided in me on my death bed. Puzzled and shocked expressions dotted the faces of all my listeners until finally, Hazel broke the silence.

“Well, now I’m confused,” the young girl chirped loudly without an ounce of shame. “I thought Ashbourne was one of our allies or something? Why would they want to kill you?” She cocked her head to the side and crossed her arms. I let out a slight chuckle at her humorous pose before I remembered we were in the presence of a king.

“Well, I think that’s part of it. He didn’t kill me, but he clearly had the chance.” I straightened my pose as I ran my mind through our close encounters. “When he first led me away, when he nearly shot me with an arrow, and even after he disclosed my location to the queen, he had every opportunity. I should have been dead long ago, but he wanted me alive. Perhaps we should question him more to unearth his true motives.” I looked over to Peter for any further thoughts.

“There’s something you should know, princess,” He looked a little uneasy as if anticipating being scolded. “The assassin escaped just before I came to find you.” A look of shame crossed his face, and I suddenly understood why he hadn’t arrived at the mill for so long.

“It’s alright, Peter,” I placed a reassuring hand on his arm and his tension lessened. “I cannot blame you for his escape. The man was a snake and clearly had plans from the start that we were unaware of.”

“I do think he was honest about one thing though,” Peter added, drawing my attention. “His nickname and purpose for being here.”

My eyes widened in understanding. “The mirror,” I chimed in, feeling the wheels turn in my mind. “He said that his true objective was to reflect a person’s true self. Could that mean that this was all just a test?” My voice rose slightly in frustration at the idea, but I couldn’t help it. If this was all some sick game from Ashbourne, then I was going to be more than just a little upset.

“That could very well be,” the king said. “The Ashbourne kingdom is founded on strength and trickery. Many of their nobles have been known to cause trouble amongst the Emerald Realm and

sadly, King Darius doesn't do much to stop it. He often will smooth over conflicts with large gifts in order to maintain peace. It would not surprise me if your assassin was just a toy for one of those nobles." The king shook his head disapprovingly, clearly not fond of his northern neighbor.

"Honestly, I hope you're right." I sighed in aggravation. "I shall have to arrange a meeting with the Ashbourne ambassadors to be certain. However, if this truly was just an elaborate prank, then I'm grateful there shouldn't be any further conflicts to be feared." I took a deep breath, then gazed around at all the friendly faces standing amongst me. "Well, since we're all here, why don't we adjourn to the dining room to continue this conversation? Earl, do you think the cooks will be able to serve everyone?" My stomach growled as I hoped the answer to be yes.

"Of course, Your Highness." The butler bowed with a warm smile. "We shall whip up a grand feast in honor of your safe return." Cheerful smiles and hugs followed his announcement, then we made our way down to the dining hall.

I was bombarded with questions from each of the girls throughout the entire walk. Some asked about simple things like palace life or tiaras, while Glenda asked the hard questions about what I planned to do next. Throughout our chatting, they mentioned that they had dragged Mr. Dwarfer along with them and placed him in the tender care of the castle guards. I was happy to hear that he was safely out of the town. Throughout all the chatter and attention I was receiving, I couldn't help but notice Peter's constant gaze upon me in the corner of my eye. I wanted to break away from the group and lace my fingers through his, but I knew it wouldn't be a good moment for it.

When we arrived at the table, it had been set for twelve and I noticed a young gentleman already seated at one of the table ends. He rose from his seat upon seeing me and approached me with a formal bow. "Princess Arabella, I am so relieved to see you are safe and well." He rose from his bow and looked at me with attractive blue eyes. He had well-kept blonde hair and somewhat familiar features. Suddenly, I recognized his father's face when he introduced himself. "My name is Prince Jasper Cyprus of Drancos."

My face flushed from embarrassment at not recognizing him sooner. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince Jasper." I gave a dainty curtsy as I gathered my red skirts in my hands. "I apologize for our meeting being delayed for so long." I gave a charming smile but was aching inside. Peter may be worried if I appear enchanted by the prince.

"No apology necessary. I am just elated that you are unharmed." He gave me a sweet but distant smile as he led me and the others to our seats. We all ate hungrily as delicious soups, salads, and meats cascaded out of the kitchen. The mill maids were in complete awe of some of the flavors that greeted their tastebuds, and I couldn't help but laugh and smile at their enjoyment.

Midway through the meal, the cheerful atmosphere was broken up by a serious comment from the king. "I think I need to address the elephant in the room while we are all gathered." His voice carried calmly across the table, but I felt my stomach lurch. I risked a glance at Peter, who was already looking to me with concern. "There is no longer any benefit for a marriage between Queen Minerva and myself. Therefore, I hereby revoke my proposal in front of all of you as witness, and I hope that the kingdom of Isalla will bear no ill will to me for it." He looked directly at me, and I gave him a reassuring smile before he continued, "furthermore, I still believe an official alliance between our two kingdoms is long overdue. I know this is all very sudden, but our initial arrival was with the intention of introducing my son to you, Your Highness." He directed his gaze to his son, who gave off no change of emotion.

I felt my heart drop into my stomach as the prince turned his gaze toward me. He was very attractive and had even helped save my life, but he wasn't Peter. However, Drancos had just assisted

in both my rescue and the detainment of our treasonous queen. We were deeply indebted to them and denying his son's hand may be seen as an act of selfishness. I reflected on my mother's words in her suite. Maybe she was right. If I was ever going to be the princess my kingdom deserved, then I needed to stop being so selfish.

"So what do you say, princess?" the king questioned with a fatherly smile. "Would you be willing to accept my son's hand in marriage?"

I swallowed hard as the question loomed over me. My heart ached, but my mind knew what the right answer was. I had to look at Peter before I could answer. I turned to gaze at him and saw the same sorrow I felt reflected in his eyes. I wanted to beg him to forgive me, to plead with him that I didn't want to, but he only gave me a nearly unnoticeable nod. He knew what my duty was, and he understood. I turned to face the prince with a forced smile upon my face. I knew my eyes were misting, but I could only hope he wouldn't notice. I opened my mouth to accept his proposal, but Jasper spoke first.

"I don't believe that to be necessary, Father." He kept my gaze while he spoke, and I nearly gasped in relief. "Isalla has just been through a tragic series of misfortunes and are in need of our support. However, I firmly believe that an alliance formed through marriage can be just as strong as those without. Let us allow the new leader of Isalla to face her kingdom with the assurance that she can be strong on her own, yet can still call on her allies in times of need." The prince's words were like a symphony to my ears. He gave me a friendly smile, then looked past me. I followed his gaze and saw that he was looking toward Peter, who wore a gracious expression. Had the prince picked up on our attraction to each other? My cheeks began to grow hot at the thought.

"Very well then," the king announced before raising a glass of wine. "Perhaps a marriage may be established someday, but for today, let us celebrate the return of Princess Arabella and toast to her new reign." The king wore a rosy smile as we all clinked glasses with him from across the table.

We finished the meal and began to disperse as the night dwindled on. Aurelia gave me one final hug before she returned home with the promise to visit often. With the engagement already dissolved and the assassin's letter being full of lies, we were no longer in urgent need of her as a witness. Earl prepared seven suitable guest suites for all the mill girls who graciously accepted the invitation and left for bed. Before we knew, it the grand hall was empty aside from only Peter and me. We followed each other to the plush velvet furniture that I had last sat with the ambassador on. The fire roared soothingly as the two of us sat side by side. There had been so many times I feared I would never sit within these walls again, but now that I was back, I recognized that it wasn't the castle that made me feel at home—it was the man leaning beside me.

"Peter?" I asked quietly, not wanting to disturb the peace in the air.

"Yes, princess?" he replied softly, turning to face me.

"I don't want you to go back to the outpost," I stated honestly. I needed him here with me, no matter what it took. "Will you stay here at the castle with me?" My eyes glinted hopefully as a smile spread across his lips.

"I would be honored, Your Highness, but what would I do?" He looked to me quizzically, and I smiled broadly at his approval.

"Well, a man of your rank would be suited for being my personal guard," I mentioned casually, hoping he would be intrigued. "Would you be interested in such a position? You would hardly ever be allowed from my side, but there's no one else I could hope for."

Peter's face glowed with excitement as he mutely nodded. "It would be my greatest pleasure." He wrapped me in an embrace, and I let his warmth surround me.

“There is one requirement though, that is non-negotiable,” I whispered cheekily into his ear before pulling away from his embrace.

“Oh?” he said, raising a curious eyebrow at me. “And what might that be?”

“You must only call me Arabella.” I gave him a teasing smile. “I mean it this time. No more “princess” or “your highness.” You may only use my name.” I giggled at his bemused reaction.

“Your terms are tough, but fair,” He crossed his arms and gave me a sideways smile. “Very well then, I would be honored to serve you,” he paused for a moment then winked, “Arabella.”

chapter twenty

King Darius sat prominently upon his obsidian throne as the man in black approached him in silence. It had been two months since he had been sent into the kingdom of Isalla. The morning light drifted through the stained-glass, creating jewel-toned patterns of light across the floor. The king crossed his legs and leaned his elbow against the arm of his chair comfortably.

“Well?” The king’s voice was strong and impatient. “Was your task as successful as I have been led to believe?”

The quiet man raised his head from the floor to meet the eyes of his king. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he replied proudly. “The mirror test was proven useful on both the Isallan princess and queen.”

The king permitted a slight smile at this news. “I have received word of the princess’s ongoing coronation, along with the queen’s exile. Tell me, do you believe these were just actions based on your observations?” The king’s eyes narrowed, awaiting his reply.

“Indeed, I do,” the man replied, then rose to his feet. “Under the pressure of potential death, the princess was found to be resourceful and even compassionate. Her rumored selfish nature was most likely derived from her spoiled upbringing. I fully believe she will make a just ruler, worthy of remaining our ally.” The king gave a pleased nod at his response and gestured at the man to continue.

“Queen Minerva had the exact opposite response. When her daughter went missing, she first requested me to seek her out, but upon learning her whereabouts, she demanded I dispose of her. After I refused, she found her own means of murder and nearly succeeded. She proved to be untrustworthy and too willing to take unnecessary risks, which would jeopardize their kingdom’s well-being. Not only was she bloodthirsty, but she was sloppy. She employed the help of unreliable sources, including a foolish business owner and myself. Her actions could have easily been exposed under different circumstances, proving her to be unfit to rule.”

The king smiled, appearing to be fully entertained by the man in black’s report. “Excellent work.” The king rose from his throne and approached the spy. “Ever since King Victor’s death, I have grown worried about the care our beloved ally kingdom was left in. Victor always had a bit of a... aggressive side to him, so I’m glad to hear that his daughter shall remain a tad more docile. I prefer our associates to be a tad more predictable in nature. I believe the princess will make a competent ally for our uses. I shall permit her to rule for now, and we shall save our forces for a separate invasion instead.” He stood above the man, placing a hand upon his shoulder. “You have done well my son.”

The dark-clad prince flashed a confident grin toward his father with his perfect teeth. The king lowered his hand and made his way back toward the throne, no longer interested in handing out compliments. Once seated, the prince took a half step forward.

“Are my efforts found worthy of reward, my king?” The prince gave his father an audacious smile, which was recognized with a snort.

“My... your humility still hasn’t improved,” the king grunted. “However, you have proven useful to Ashbourne, so a reward you shall receive.” The king picked up a golden, bejeweled scepter that rested by the side of his throne. He lifted the glistening staff from the ground before thumping it twice against the polished floors. An echo resounded off the walls in the empty space summoning a royal bookkeeper.

The scrawny man scurried awkwardly with a large piece of parchment in hand and quill at the ready. He positioned himself next to the king before he gave a gentle nod, noting he was ready to

receive his command.

“Let it be written,” the king decreed while the man scribbled furiously, “that as of this day, I, King Darius Agnar of Ashbourne, decree that my third son, Prince Miron Casper, be made second in line to the throne. Henceforth, he shall be placed above his second eldest brother in rank and rule.” The king leaned back into his chair as the keeper finished writing his statement before leaving from where he came.

“Thank you, Father.” Prince Miron’s eyes gleamed maliciously. “You won’t be disappointed... I assure you.”

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, looking up and down at the girl staring back at me. She was beautiful, but more so now than she ever had been. Sure, her skin was fair and flawless, and her eyes complimented her dark hair perfectly. But that didn’t stand out anymore, not like it used to. The girl who looked back at me was strong, courageous, and was surrounded by people who loved her. She had taken on her greatest fears and conquered her greatest weaknesses. She no longer possessed a poisoned heart filled with pride and vanity. Instead, her heart was filled with love and compassion for those around her. I smiled at the girl in the mirror and gave a slight twirl of excitement. Today was my coronation, and the day I became the queen of my beautiful kingdom.

After the queen was found guilty of my attempted murder, she was banished to the desolated kingdom of Sybetail. It was difficult speaking out against her, but it had to be done. Mr. Dwarfer confessed to knowing about the poisoned soap, but he had no idea he was working for the queen or killing the princess. Because of his lack of knowledge, he was given a lesser punishment of only five years of imprisonment, along with a revoke of his lands. This included the mill, which was passed onto Daniela, who had been the longest reigning employee. The queen never openly confessed to her crimes, but with mine, Earl’s, and Aurelia’s statements, the evidence was stacked against her. The Drancos kingdom stood with our ruling and signed an official alliance to support us until I found a husband to reign as king. Everything was settled with a neat, tidy bow.

Well, except the true origin of the assassin.

Per expectations, King Darius sent a congratulatory and apologetic gift for the occasion without much more thought toward the matter. And upon request, an Ashbourne delegation came forward to speak on behalf of the assassin’s conduct, but no one claimed to have any knowledge of the man. After nearly two months of back-and-forth theorizing, we finally came to the conclusion that it truly must have been the actions of a foolish noble. We never got the full story on whom he was or who had hired him, but I suppose it was the best outcome we were going to get. The good news was that there had been no further threats to me or Isalla—the new captain of my personal guard make extra certain of that. Peter had taken to the role like a fish to water, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the extra time with him.

As I stepped away from the mirror, my two dressing maids clasped their hands in excitement as they took in my appearance. Edith glowed with delight as she placed my silver tiara on my head for the last time. My newest dressing maid Hazel let out a shrill squeak of joy as she admired my rose-red gown.

“Oh, Arabella, you look perfect!” Hazel gushed as she pushed a stray hair off my forehead. “I cannot believe you’re going to be queen in only a few hours!” She jittered happily, causing both Edith and I to laugh.

After Mr. Dwarfer had been locked away for assisted murder, I offered all the girls positions at

the castle. Hazel had accepted, but everyone else chose to return to their home and work under Daniela. Well, all except for Glenda, who had reopened her bakery. I stopped by every other week to get her fresh bread and pastries. My stomach growled at the memory of the warm yeast scent that filled her shop. Unfortunately, there wasn't much time for breakfast on the day of a coronation.

Aurelia visited often, but she had to lessen her time at the mill to smooth things over with her parents. They were furious when they learned the full story behind our meeting, even though it led to her assisting in my rescue. I wrote to her often, hoping to help cheer up her lonely days at the estate. Hopefully, her parents would lighten up in time. Aside from her less than fortunate outcome, I still followed her lead on the treatment of my servants. At first, the changes were met with confusion, but after time, the staff became much more cheerful with my new compassionate approach. It was truly satisfying being able to repay their loyalty in all the small ways I could.

"You look stunning," Edith chimed in, breaking my thoughts. She had just completed the perfect placement of my tiara. "And I know we won't be the only ones who think so..." The girls giggled, and I rolled my eyes. It wasn't hard to imagine who they were referring to.

"Peter thinks I look good no matter what I wear," I chided, but internally, I was hoping that he would be impressed. "He's seen me in a laundry mill uniform before and still followed me around." I laughed with the girls as they added final touches to my gown. It was a similar dress to the one Aurelia had once lent me; however, this gown had elegant ruffles that cascaded down the skirt with detailed embroidery around the bodice and capped sleeves.

"He won't be able to take his eyes off you!" Hazel teased, adding the dramatic flair of a fake swoon. We giggled away the hours until the time came for the coronation.

As I approached the grand hall, Peter stood guard at the front of the entry doors awaiting my arrival. The grand hall was still being filled with spectators, so we were positioned in a side corridor while we waited for the ceremony to begin. It was just the two of us in the small space, but that had become a common occurrence ever since he became my personal guard. We had spent so much time together over the past two months, and I was grateful I got to share this important day with him. My heart fluttered from nerves when familiar warmth spread across my palm. I looked up at Peter, who was now petting my hand as he always did.

"You look beautiful, Arabella." He turned to face me still holding my hand. His compliments hit differently than anyone else's ever had, and I was certain I would never grow tired of them.

"Before you step into the hall and become the most incredible queen Isalla has ever known, there is something I must tell you." He gave me a sweet smile as he gazed into my eyes.

"You can tell me anything Peter, you know that." I gave his hand a light squeeze and his eyes lit up from the touch as my nerves melted away.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he said with his signature cheeky grin, "because... I cannot continue to be your guard."

Instantly, my heart sank. Was he going to leave me?

"I cannot be your guard anymore because it is too difficult," He continued and smiled, but I was growing concerned. Had I been overusing him? Why hadn't he told me? "It's too hard because I cannot bear another day standing beside you without knowing if I can be by your side forever."

"Peter, I don't understand—" I started but was silenced when he dropped down to one knee, still holding my hand.

"I'm saying that I wish to be more than just your guard." His words felt like a dream as he pulled a beautiful golden ring from his pocket. "I wish to protect with all that I am. Princess Arabella Ivory Zakaria, would you do me the greatest honor I could ever receive and become my wife?" He held the

ring out to me with the most loving expression in his glistening jade eyes.

I felt my eyes mist over as my heart nearly flew out of my chest from joy. I would have cried in pure happiness if I wasn't about to face my entire kingdom as their new queen. "Yes, of course!" I exclaimed as I leapt into his arms. He held me in his embrace for a long moment, then pulled back with his face inches from mine. "I love you, Peter," I whispered as he gently leaned forward.

"I love you, too," he whispered back, pulling me into a kiss.

Slowly, we separated, though we still held each other tightly. My grin was unmoving, and my body pulsed with the greatest joy I had ever felt. I was about to lean in for another kiss when a sudden knock alerted me that they were ready for my entrance. I pulled away regretfully, but beamed as my future king gave me a loving smile.

"They're waiting for you, my princess." He slid the golden ring onto my finger and my heart swelled as I looked at the sparking circlet. "When I see you again, you shall be my queen."

I wrapped him in a final hug before walking toward the grand entrance. Then my next quest shall be to make you my king." I turned back to give him a quick wink, then strode grandly into the hall to accept the rule of my beautiful Isalla.

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